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A NOBLE WOMAN.

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A NOBLE WOMAN.

CHAPTER I.

THE day was waning fast, and the lamplighters were hurrying along, attending to their business. A gleam of light stood still in the pale-blue sky, while a slightly opaque mist was settling on the ground. Splendid, seasonable weather, cold, dry, and clear, the atmosphere only faintly re-echoing the distant sounds of winter; the snow, trodden into solid, hard layers, making a crunching noise beneath the pedestrians' feet, rising into a creak at the corners of the streets under the ploughing skates of the sledges. Everything partook of the trim, inspiriting appearance of a severe and prolonged frost. Suddenly a solitary star pierced the pale firmament, to be almost immediately followed by various constellations suspended in the limpid ether over the housetops. The thermometer stood at eighteen degrees Reaumur.

'This is something like a frost,' grumbled a pessimist driver to a comrade huddled up in the doorway of a drinking-shop—'this is something like a frost; the devil take it!'

'What for?' queried the other, who happened to be an optimist. 'We need not mind the frost; it will make it good for business; our swells like to be abroad in such weather as this.'

The pessimist shrugged his shoulders, and began swaying from one leg on to another, without keeping time, however, as any other but a downright Russian would have done.

'Isvostchik!' cried a voice from a short distance.

Both drivers jumped into their sledges, and drove their cattle to the spot whence the voice had come. Two gentlemen, wrapped in furs, seated themselves in the vehicles, the horses of which at once swung into a quick trot, and disappeared in opposite directions. The street became once more deserted.

By this time the street lamps had all been lighted, but as they stood great distances apart, their jets were scarcely visible through the panes of glass thickly covered with fantastic arabesques of rime. It did not matter much, for nobody passed.

It was, in fact, a street in which there was little traffic, on foot or otherwise. Situated in an outskirt almost at the very end of St. Petersburg, its one side was wholly made up of a series of breast-high wooden palings, fencing in market-gardens; the other side of small, antiquated wooden tenements, generally consisting of only a ground-floor and roofed in with boards. The houses had, once upon a time, been painted from top to base a kind of yellowish-brown, melancholy to look upon, but the successive thaws, rain, and sunshine had carefully effaced all signs of those attempts at decoration, only leaving faint streaks of it here and there.

At the tiny windows, almost square in shape, and made double to guard against the biting cold, there stood a great number of evergreens and other hardy plants, the dark green of which, interspersed with the more brilliant hue of a few rare flowers, threw warm tints into the otherwise chilly picture.

Behind the plants the white calico blinds, drawn down their full length at that hour, provided a barrier between the outer world and the humble fold eking out existence there. Small annuitants, retired Government employés of the most modest order, tradesmen's widows, such were the inhabitants of this street and the adjacent ones.

Nevertheless the street was wide, very wide even, and full of light and air throughout the year. In summer the neighbourhood of the kitchen-gardens afforded those sufficiently fortunate to possess a first-floor the pleasure of watching the growth of endless rows of cabbages; a little further on a few spectral birch-trees hemmed in the horizon, but between these and the deserted street a large patch of open sky afforded at all seasons the enjoyment of the spectacle of majestically sailing or violently scudding clouds. In the winter, though, at certain hours of the day and, above all, of the night, this quiet street became a prey to excitement, almost periodical. The peaceful tenants of the old dwellings, leaving their cups of tea, and abandoning their innocent games, rushed to their windows, and lifted a corner of their blinds; the jingling of bells, faint enough in the distance, had struck their practised ears. The sound came gradually nearer, and then, as if borne upon the whirlwind, one or more troïkas, drawn by spirited horses, went by. The large six-seat sledges, hung with furs, filled with dashing officers in brilliant uniforms, and women in priceless sables, flashed past amidst shouts of laughter, deafening noise of bells, joyous exclamation and song. The shouts of laughter died away in the distance, the silvery, jingling sound grew fainter and fainter, all became still again. The good folk went back to their tea, and resumed their games, saying to one another: 'It's a party of officers going to the Red Tavern'

CHAPTER II.

THE Red Tavern had, in days gone by, been a shanty close to one of the gates of St. Petersburg, where carters and draymen stopped to refresh themselves before entering the capital. No reason could be assigned for its having become fashionable, unless it was a duel or two that took place in the immediate vicinity, which encounters were followed by more or less boisterous breakfasts in the outlying and far from comfortable inn.

At present there stands on the site of the former tavern a magnificent restaurant. The suave proprietor is courteous and discreet, the soft-footed and soft-tongued attendants are obsequious and more discreet still—they understand a nod even better than the proverbial blind horse. One may sup or dine there alone or in company, isolated from all the other guests, and without the latter having the least inkling of one's presence there; one may join the brilliant throng in the sumptuously decorated refection-rooms. It is there that for years the most mysterious meetings have taken place, it is there that for years the most brilliant orgies have been enacted. From time to time the police, in spite of themselves, have been compelled to pay a visit to the place in order to apprehend an intruder; but, as a rule, the company consists of the best men of Russian society—of the worst women.

At the hour in which our story opens—the hour at which the animation of the Red Tavern was at its height—the cold had kept at home many of the latter. The fittest time for a troïka party is that in which the thermometer falls, but on that day the thermometer had been going down so rapidly as to render its fall to twenty-five or thirty degrees by midnight more than likely.

A pleasure-trip under such circumstances may frighten

even the most pleasure-loving Russian; nevertheless, one solitary troïka entered the one end of the street at a rattling gallop just as at the opposite end a female form walked hurriedly along the boarded-over side-walk next to the houses.

The open sledge only contained three young officers, all three handsome fellows, apparently full of devilment and fuller still of liquor. They had lunched that very morning at another fashionable restaurant in the centre of St. Petersburg, to celebrate the triumph of one of them who had bonneted an innocent civilian on coming out of the Russian theatre, and had afterwards insisted upon his 'unmannerly' victim apologizing for resenting the joke, in which effort he (the 'jokist') had succeeded.

'Glory be to the victor!' sang one of the three youngsters in French to the tune of the finale of some opera. 'I say, Trophimus, blow off steam a bit, while there is no one about. After that you may thunder up to the tavern. It is as well to astonish the natives a bit.'

The submissive driver slackened the pace of his spirited cattle, which dropped into a quiet walk, their heads bent down and breathing heavily.

'I tell you what, gentlemen,' said Valerian Gretzky. 'When I come to think of it, I consider that these ladies have treated us very scurvily in refusing to accompany us. What is more, I mean to be even with them.'

'What was their reason?' asked Rézof in a placid way, pulling the bearskin that covered his knees closer around him.

'Mariette said that Sabakine and I were disgustingly tight.' Gretzky used the French expression *pochard* to denote a condition perfectly Russian. 'Yes, she said that we were disgustingly "tight," and that she did not

like drunken people. Now, I leave it to you, gentlemen; is it not downright ridiculous to pretend that we are drunk?'

The officers burst out laughing, whereupon Gretzky went on:

'Mariette is a conceited, strait-laced idiot, and I told her so, adding that we could very well manage to enjoy ourselves without her and her friends. The first chance acquaintance will do just as well, as regards wit and cleverness.'

'A cheer for the first chance acquaintance!' shouted Rézof, with a self-satisfied air.

'A cheer for the first chance acquaintance!' bellowed Sabakine after him. 'Still,' dropping his voice, 'we want to enjoy ourselves, and our own company is scarcely sufficient for that. We must get some girls to join us, but I don't see how we can manage it.'

'I don't think that's very difficult,' said Rézof; 'there is any amount of them to be picked up in the restaurant.' Then suddenly interrupting himself: 'By Jove! we need not go as far; here's one, and a pretty one, too. Let's ask her to supper.'

The female form that had appeared at the other end of the street had by this time come to within a few yards of the sledge. The light of the gas lamp shone full into her dark eyes, too deep-set to distinguish their colour; the light fell full on the handsome features, flushed with the cold, on the deep-red, shapely lips. The sledge advanced slowly and noiselessly over the hardened snow, close to the wooden footway.

Gretzky clambered out of the sledge and went up to the young woman.

'Madame or *nevesta*' (miss), 'be your name Macha or Âcha,' he said with exaggerated politeness, 'pity three

poor bachelors deprived of the female element, and do us the honour to sup with us.'

The young woman drew back in order to put a greater distance between herself and her interlocutor, then cast a glance around her. The street was deserted; there was not a soul at the windows, and she became alarmed.

'Pray let me go,' she said in a sweet voice, trembling, however, with fear.

'Not likely,' exclaimed Rézof; 'such a pretty girl as you! No, indeed, we will not.'

He also jumped out of the sledge. Sabakine followed suit, and the three hemmed in the young woman.

'Gentlemen,' she said firmly, 'let me go, or I'll call for help.'

'The lady wants persuading,' said Sabakine, imitating to perfection the mincing airs and graces of a Parisian governess giving her pupil a lesson in pretty behaviour; 'a cheer for the first chance acquaintance, and away with her to the Red Tavern, gentlemen.'

A mad idea suddenly struck the three young men: no one knew who had conceived it, so quickly was it caught up by all and executed. The young woman was lifted off her feet, the bearskin rug was flung over her head; she uttered a cry, but in that street people were accustomed to hear women's voices mingling with the drunken cries of 'golden masherdom.'

No, no one appeared, and the young woman was placed in the sledge, the horses started at a break-neck gallop, and two minutes afterwards the three officers, carrying their victim, who was unsuccessfully struggling with them, entered a private dining-room of the Red Tavern.

The waiter who generally attended on them had rushed to the door on seeing their conveyance. He

fancied the whole thing to be merely a pleasant practical joke, for these gentlemen frequently indulged in such. So he merely smiled and retired discreetly.

Sabakine just opened the door and called after him to order the dinner.

'Let it be ready in about an hour,' he shouted to the waiter, who was already at the other end of the passage.

The latter turned round, nodded mysteriously, and disappeared. The door closed once more, and Sabakine put the key in his pocket.

CHAPTER III.

THE weatherwise had not been mistaken; the thermometer kept falling, and towards nine o'clock the full moon stood in an almost cloudless and glacial sky. The rime lay thick and white in dazzling, fantastic design on roof and hoarding; not a soul stirred in the deserted street after the troïka had carried away its booty. The postman, caring little for other people's epistolary correspondence, had remained in his ingle-nook, thinking that the morning would do just as well for the letters. One solitary figure, however, stood out in dark and bold relief against the white background of the street. It was a short, thin, wiry old man, wrapped in a fur coat, much the worse for wear, his cap of the same material pulled over his ears. He was standing on the threshold of his door, his ears strained and his neck craned anxiously in the direction of the city, whence seemed to issue some vague sounds. He kept on listening, then sadly shook his head, went indoors, but only to return to his former position in about five minutes.

'Nothing?' inquired a quivering, broken voice, as he

recommenced the selfsame manœuvre for about the twentieth time.

'Nothing, my dear Anna,' he replied; 'nothing at all.'

A deep-drawn sigh was all he got for an answer. He went up to his aged, invalid wife, confined to her chair for the last twelvemonth with severe rheumatism, and took the swollen hand of his life's companion affectionately in his.

'What can have happened to her?' crooned Madame Porof; 'so dear, so good a girl, and always so punctual! What can have become of her?' she repeated.

Porof shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

'Did you send to inquire at Madame Graaf's?' suddenly inquired the mother, her eyes kindling with a glimmer of revived hope.

'No, I did not,' exclaimed the old man in an animated tone. 'I never thought of it. What a fool I was to have forgotten it!'

He ran quickly to the kitchen where the two servants, with consternation written on their faces, were awaiting the return of their young mistress. He despatched the younger to Madame Graaf, whose house was not far away, then came back to his wife.

'Do eat something, my dear, while we are waiting,' said the latter, looking at the table where the food stood untasted.

'No, thank you; I am not hungry,' came the answer.

'But you had better take something—a cup of beef-tea, a mouthful of bread.'

The mother turned away her head with a despondent, grief-stricken movement, but at the same time a slight noise in the kitchen made them both look up, and Porof rushed to the back door, in the opening of which the cook appeared.

'Madame Graaf bids me tell you that she has not seen Mademoiselle Raïssa,' said the servant, out of breath.

'Very well,' said Porof, 'you may go.' He came back to his wife, whose hand he took once more, stroking it long and tenderly.

'Sit down a bit, my dear,' said the mother, trying to look cheerful; 'don't keep standing; you make me feel worse.'

Porof did as he was bidden, and sat down by the side of his wife.

'She'll come back all right, take my word for it, and explain her delay simply enough. Some girl's freak of which we had no idea. She was going to take her music lesson, wasn't she?'

'Yes,' sighed the old man.

'Well, she may have gone on some errand, which she had forgotten. The holidays are coming, she may have gone to the Gostinoï-Dvor' (bazaar).

An old-fashioned clock on the wall struck ten.

'The Gostinoï-Dvor has closed long ago,' said the old man in a mournful tone.

The mother said no more, and a deep silence fell upon the small room, badly lighted by two of those particular candles, half tallow, half stearine, which only make darkness visible, and which are always smoking.

'My Raïssa,' suddenly cried the mother, bursting into tears, 'my girl whom I bore, whom I nursed, whom I tended; my only child, precious to me as the light of my eyes! She is dead, assuredly she is dead, Peter; she must be dead not to have come back to us!'

'If she is not to come back to us it were better that she were dead, and I hope she is,' said the old man, raising his head.

'For shame,' said Madame Porof; 'you do not believe that our angel——'

Her husband left her no time to complete the sentence.

'No, my dear wife. I do not believe that she has run away with someone. I do not believe that she has disgraced her parents. I believe with you, that she has not come back, because she is dead.'

'My girl, my darling girl!' shrieked the mother, uplifting her emaciated arms; 'why was I not allowed to die first? It was but fit that she should have closed mine eyes. Peter, light a taper before the image of our blessed Saviour, take our wedding candle, which is never used except to arrest Heaven's blast of lightning or to pray for the sick in mortal peril. Our house is in mortal peril, my dear husband; our house is in peril. Light the candle of deliverance.'

The old man went slowly into the adjacent room, the door of which stood ajar. With trembling hands he took from the cupboard that held the sacred images the taper blessed by the priest on his wedding-day: he lighted it before the image of our Lord, crossed himself, and thrice bowed down before it. Then he came back to his wife, who was absorbed in deep prayer, her hands pressed against one another, her eyes fixed upon the image, visible from where she sat.

Once more a deep, deep silence fell upon the room. The clock of a distant tower struck the half-hour after ten; after that the silence seemed to grow more intense. The room was but poorly furnished; an old square piano, in the style of the first French Empire, was its chief ornament; a few chairs, upholstered in horsehair, an armchair in faded plush, a round dining-table, made up the rest of the furniture The two windows offered a lively contrast to the lowly aspect of the apartment. Between

the coarsely embroidered muslin curtains and the snow-white blinds there lay a flower-bed in miniature. Two magnificent fuchsias bending beneath the weight of their pendulous masses of blue and red, a splendid cactus, rows of scarlet geraniums, testified to the constant and loving care of the young mistress of the house. A canary asleep in its cage, hanging immediately over the cactus, was no doubt meant to delight the solitary hours of the absent one. But, alas! what would, without her, become of this patch of joyous spring, the victory, as it were, of man over winter?

A hurried step resounded on the footway outside the house. The invalid raised her head; Porof sat as if petrified. The step drew nearer and nearer, hurriedly, but evidently unsteady. When it got beneath the window it abruptly stopped.

'It is she!' cried the mother, beside herself, 'it is she! but she is afraid to come in.'

With a single bound the father was in the small passage, and opened the door. His daughter brushed past him without seeing him. She ran as far as her mother, and flung herself at the latter's feet, kissing her knees.

'Mother—father!' she gasped.

'Whence come you?' asked Porof sternly, placing his hands on her shoulder.

'Whence come I?' repeated Raïssa, starting to her feet. 'Whence come I? May Heaven's blast fall upon the accursed house that sheltered me!'

With a magnificent movement she tore from her shoulders the fur cloak, which dropped on the floor. Her hood was thrown into another corner of the room, and she stood before her parents with dishevelled locks, her hands swollen with the exertion of a struggle; but her features were deadly pale, in spite of her headlong rush.

'I don't know,' she said, in an almost strident voice, 'what the place whence I come is called, nor do I know the names of those who took me thither; but before God and before you, father and mother, I swear that it is not my doing that I have been dishonoured.'

The mother groaned and fell back in her chair, her hand on her heart, which throbbed violently. Forgetting everything for the moment, Raïssa leapt towards her, unfastened her dress, found the drops that as a rule allayed those fits, and revived the poor woman by her caresses.

When Madame Porof came to, her first impulse was to fling her arms round her daughter and to strain her to her heart. Raïssa returned her kisses in full and with interest, but she was evidently feverishly excited, her teeth chattered, her hands shook, her eyes flashed with an almost unholy fire.

When Madame Porof had given vent to her pent-up feelings by copious tears, the father, who had hitherto been silent, turned to his daughter.

'In the name of God the Saviour, tell me the truth. Is this roof to shelter you, or are you to be driven ignominiously from it?'

'In the name of the Sacred Truth, father,' replied Raïssa, 'by the hour that witnessed my baptism, you ought to avenge me!'

The father opened his arms to his daughter, and strained her to his heart; then he gave her blessing by making the sign of the Cross over her, after which he slowly walked to the bedroom, and extinguished the 'wedding taper.'

'Tell us what has happened to you,' he said without any further remark, seating himself close to his wife.

Raïssa, standing upright between them, began her story.

CHAPTER IV.

'You know,' she said, 'that I went to take my music lesson. My mistress had gone out, and she came in late, so that instead of beginning at three we did not begin until four. When we had finished it was getting dusk. Madame Sirine offered to send her servant home with me. I refused to trouble her. Why should I have been afraid to go alone to-day, when I had walked that way alone a hundred times? I walked very quickly, for I knew I was late and felt afraid of your being uneasy. When I entered our street I noticed a troïka galloping towards me. You know, father, that I fear meeting that kind of vehicle, the occupants of which are as a rule not very considerate of the feelings of young girls, so I slackened my pace, thinking that, as usual, it would turn down the street leading out of the town. I do not know why the driver slackened his pace also. There was nothing for it but to go back or to pass near the troïka. I made up my mind to do the latter, and to walk quicker still. At the moment I was going to pass it, the three men that were in it got out. It was but a few steps from here. One of them spoke and asked me to come with them. I answered him as I felt I ought, when suddenly a rug was flung over my head, and I was lifted into the sledge. I endeavoured to cry out, but who could have heard me?'

'She shouted, Peter, she shouted,' interrupted Madame Porof, nervously clutching the hand of her husband. 'She shouted, and we did not hear her.'

The old man merely bowed his head and continued to stare at his daughter. The latter spoke without the slightest hesitation; her feverish blood rushed to her

cheeks, chasing away the deadly pallor, and her eyes flashed fire. She went on:

'I was lifted into the sledge like a mere bundle, and I only regained my footing in a sumptuously-furnished apartment. The three men that had carried me off were all drunk; all three are officers in the Guards. I do not know their names, but to my dying day I shall recognise them. They simply sneered at me, pretending that I was playing the comedy of "The Virtuous Maiden." After that they tried to tempt me by all kinds of promises. One of them emptied his pocket-book on the table, before me. All my shouting and calling for help proved useless. Nevertheless, there was a knock at the door; it was a servant who brought wine. They pushed me in the next room, where there was no light. It was champagne the servant had brought; they wanted to make me drink with them. I hurled the glass they offered me into their faces. Here, see for yourself.'

Raïssa held out her hand, which showed a deep, long, bloody gash in the palm.

'Thereupon,' she continued, without noticing the look of pity from her mother—'thereupon they became furious. "Let's have done with it," said one; "it's becoming ridiculous." Once more I was pushed into the dark room. I struggled, but it was of no use; one of them followed, while the others sang to drown my cries. Finding that resistance would not avail me, I supplicated, I called out. I might have saved myself the trouble. I do not know the infamous den where such crimes can be committed; but no one came, though I resumed the struggle. Alas! I was but a weak woman. I lost my honour, but my soul is free from all stain and

'Tell me what this man was like,' said Porof suddenly, clenching his fists, his teeth tightly set, his lips ashy pale.

'I did not see him,' answered Raïssa.

'What! you do not know?'

'I do not know which of the three it was, and probably I may never know; but I would recognise the three anywhere.'

While Raïssa was speaking her mother wept silently, covering her face with her hands.

'How did you get out?' asked the father, after a spell of silence.

'The door of the room in which I was opened; they called the man who was with me.'

'By his name?' asked Porof eagerly.

'No; they said, "Come here a minute; we wish to speak to you." He left me, and I only saw them again together. It appears that some other horror was being committed in the house at the same time, for I heard them mention the police. After that they came up to me very politely, and told me that we had better go. They helped me on with my cloak, they flung a shawl over my head, and one of them, I do not know which, put the muzzle of a revolver to my brow, saying that they would kill me if I attempted to cry out. I had no longer aught to lose, so I kept silent. When I felt myself in the open air I wanted to escape. They held me back, pledging their honour that they would take me to town, and that I should be free. This time they seemed serious, and, unless I am mistaken, they were afraid. I thought of you, dear parents, and tried to be patient. In the sledge, my head still wrapped, they prevented me from seeing anything. They made me get out. I found myself in a canal, not far from

came on here. There are girls that hide their shame—that is, when they deserved it. But I have not deserved it. You will avenge me, father mine, will you not?'

'I will,' said Porof solemnly.

Raïssa knelt down before her parents, who gave her their blessing by making the sign of the Cross over her.

'I feel very ill,' suddenly said Madame Porof.

They carried her to bed, and the doctor was sent for. He prescribed a sedative, but the old woman, who also suffered from disease of the heart, had received too severe a shock to recover. Porof had been an army surgeon for thirty-two years; he had no need of a colleague to tell him that his wife's last hours had come.

At daybreak, a late and chilly daybreak, the cruel white light threw its glimmer on the death-struggle of the poor mother. But the end was more painless: before the sun set she had breathed her last. She passed away peacefully as if going to sleep.

Raïssa stood by her mother's body without shedding a tear. The new disaster was virtually swallowed up by the previous one. Even Porof appeared to look upon it in that way, for he was as calm as his daughter. To both the two catastrophes formed but one—one cruel blow of Fate. Madame Porof was buried with the usual ceremonial, the friends of the family being present. The outer world had got wind of what had befallen Raïssa, because the servants had overheard a few words, and seeing that Porof had not taken the trouble to explain why he had raised a hue and cry for his daughter everywhere during several hours, curiosity, both spiteful and sympathetic, was considerably excited in their narrow circle.

According to custom, there was a collation immediately after the funeral. When the 'bitter jelly,' representing

the 'cup of bitterness,' which among the middle classes replaces the goblet of brandy used among the higher, was being handed round, Porof rose and spoke.

'Friends and neighbours,' he began, 'you all know how patiently my poor wife bore her illness and troubles. In spite of her afflictions she might have lived for many years, and in the ordinary course of nature seen her grandchildren grow up around her.' Here all eyes were turned to Raïssa, who, in deep mourning, was seated opposite to her father. The old man went on: 'The Lord willed it otherwise. A misfortune, which we did nothing to deserve, has fallen upon our home, and the dear departed was not strong enough to bear it. Let us hope that the sorely-tried mother will meet with her reward in a better life. Meanwhile, it is our duty, in justice to her memory, to ourselves, to ask for earthly justice.'

Thereupon the collect for the dead was intoned thrice, but the guests were as wise as ever as to the meaning of Porof's enigmatical speech. The explanation came, however, two days later, when the rumour spread that Peter Porof had lodged with the 'master of police' of his quarter an information of the abduction and outrage of his daughter Raïssa, a minor.

With many a long-winded preamble, the relatives, neighbours, and friends came to question the old doctor on the subject of this extraordinary step.

'It is quite true,' invariably replied Porof. 'There is no need for me to make a secret of it, for we did not commit the crime.'

Nevertheless, people began to point out Raïssa to their neighbours; as she walked along the streets corners of blinds were discreetly lifted at her approach. She did not appear to notice it, and continued to go about with

proudly-raised head and unabashed mien; but an expression of indomitable tenacity had settled permanently on her features.

'What a brazen-faced hussy!' thought some matrons; and though they did not give utterance to these thoughts, Raïssa was sufficiently clever to guess at them, so from the moment of her mother's funeral she left off paying visits. But every day, accompanied by her father, she took long walks in the quarters most frequented by the nobility, and, above all, by the officers of the Guards.

CHAPTER V.

A WEEK had elapsed since Madame Porof's funeral, and St. Petersburg Society was still profoundly ignorant of the dastardly outrage that had been committed in the Red Tavern. The particulars of the complaint lodged with the 'master of police' of the district by old Porof had as yet not penetrated the 'upper crust,' which fact did not prevent, as we have already seen, the comments of Raïssa's immediate neighbours.

On that particular evening the sumptuous drawing-rooms of Countess Gretzky were ablaze with light; the company was, however, more select than numerous, owing to a ball given at the same time at the French Embassy, to which the flower of the Russian aristocracy had been invited. Only a small number of young matrons and girls, the most intimate of the Countess's friends, showed themselves for a few moments at the weekly gathering to have their toilets admired. The parade elicited the remark of the charming hostess, that she had all the pleasure of the 'show,' while the French Ambassador and his wife had all the trouble of it.

The word 'charming,' which was invariably tacked to the Countess's name, was not misapplied, as it often is in such cases. The Countess fully deserved the praise. Having lost a dearly-beloved husband while young, Madame Gretzky had nobly borne her trial. Her long widowhood had been as utterly free from the ostentatious display of grief as from the ostentatious display of frivolity. Her enormous fortune, as well as her birth and subsequent alliance, had given her a place apart, even among the *élite* of Russian society. She was a lady of honour to the Empress, who held her in great esteem and affection; but, from a lofty disdain of everything mean, Madame Gretzky never took advantage of the influence of her position, to solicit either for herself or for her relatives. Not but that she asked favours very often, but her protégés were humble folk, honest, genuine, and shame-faced poor, and the charity she craved and almost always obtained was worthily bestowed. Nor did she hesitate to solicit aid from the occupants of the throne themselves, which made the Emperor (Alexander II.) and his consort remark that 'Countess Gretzky never came but with her hands full of petitions.'

'True, your Majesty,' replied the latter; 'but, on the other hand, I take care never to leave but with my hands full of practical proofs of your benevolence, which balances the thing in the end.'

With such dispositions Countess Gretzky might have surrounded herself with all those whom she had benefited. She preferred not to do so. The moment she had accomplished her self-imposed task with regard to one of her clients, she deliberately removed him or her from her path. To some who inquired as to the motive of this ostracism imposed, she replied: 'Gratitude is like an

unfinished photograph: if you flash the light of day upon it it becomes blotchy and indistinct.'

It was just because there were so few blotchy or indistinct sentiments to be met with in Countess Gretzky's reception-rooms that the latter became the most pleasant resort in the Russian capital. At times the long suite of apartments leading to the drawing-room proper were absolutely deserted—a group of half a dozen men and women, cosily ensconced in large armchairs, and gathered round a softly-burning lamp, made up the whole of the company; at others, the rooms contained a hundred guests; but whether there were a hundred or a handful, the conversation was always clever and interesting, because the mistress of the house was no ordinary woman. A mere glance would tell as much to the most casual observer who took the trouble to look at her as she was sitting in a low, wide armchair, her nephew, Valerian Gretzky, standing by her side.

'You are not going to the ball then, aunt?' said the latter.

'No,' came the answer; 'first of all, my Thursday keeps me at home; secondly, I am tired. The sudden illness of my secretary compels me to attend personally to my correspondence, and it is really getting beyond me. The new postal system is perhaps the only relentless enemy I have, for I should like you to see the shoals of letters sent to me every day. Or rather,' she corrected herself, 'I should not like you to see them, because though some are so comic as to trench upon the ridiculous, there are others so heartrending as to tempt one to retire from the world altogether.'

'The Countess is right,' remarked an old General, who was sitting on a sofa close to his hostess. 'A man or a woman must have the love of one's fellow-creatures

strongly implanted to resist the temptation of shutting himself or herself up like a hermit or a nun. My correspondence is not so voluminous as that of the Countess, but facts are brought under my notice every day calculated to doubt the benefits of this much-vaunted civilization of ours. No later than this morning I heard at the Ministry of Police a story which for simple horror beats any and every thing ever invented by modern novelists or their predecessors.'

'Do tell us all about it, General,' came a chorus of pretty voices.

'I am afraid it would not be consistent with my duty,' objected the veteran. 'It was only by the merest accident that I saw the report. It reached the Minister as I was talking to him. He confided the contents of it to me in the strictest confidence, and really my duty——'

'You have read the report?' was the general cry, and on the affirmative nod of the warrior, a young artillery officer settled the question at once.

'Then your first duty is not to keep it back from your friends,' he said.

'Is it a robbery?' asked Valerian Gretzky.

'Much worse,' said the General. 'Much worse,' he repeated; 'and I can scarcely tell it to you in the presence of the ladies.'

The last sentence only added fuel to the fire of curiosity, so that the General was at last bound to comply.

'I will tell you, though I shall not mention any names, and provided there are no single ladies here,' he said cautiously.

'I warn you, General,' said Countess Gretzky, playfully shaking her finger at him, 'that if your story is in the least—what shall I say?—well, unsavoury, I shall have you removed after having heard it.'

'Unsavoury is a relative term, Countess, but the main fact is that a young girl was abducted at four in the afternoon, in the civilized capital of the Russian Empire, by three officers who happened to be passing in a troïka. The young girl——'

A crash of falling porcelain interrupted the speaker. When the company looked up, they saw Valerian Gretzky standing by the overturned table. His face was deadly pale, though this was scarcely noticed in the soft light diffused through the room.

'I am so sorry, aunt; my foot slipped,' said Valerian Gretzky, in a slightly trembling voice. The few moments between the crash and the explanation had been sufficient for him to suppress his violent emotion. 'I do not know what I have broken,' he added.

'Not anything of value,' replied the Countess good-humouredly, then turned to the General. 'Pray go on, General,' she said.

'The young girl,' continued the General, 'was, as I have already told you, carried off by three officers just about dusk. They took her to the Red Tavern, and there, in spite of her resistance, committed a violent outrage on her. Heaven alone knows what would have happened, for these three gentlemen were drunk, if, fortunately, an unexpected visit of the police—not connected with this dastardly act—had not compelled those miserable cowards to seek safety in flight.'

Valerian, who had meanwhile sunk into a low chair, started bolt upright at the words 'miserable cowards.' Everyone's glance was turned towards him.

'Yes, Gretzky,' said the old warrior. 'I understand your disgust and indignation. Those wretches have sullied your uniform, but be assured that their punishment——'

'The end of the story, the end of the story!' exclaimed several voices at once.

'The end of the story!' repeated the General; 'it is simple enough; they got rid of their victim as quickly as possible, by driving her back to town, and putting her down near her home. She returned to her parents; her mother, who had been ailing for years, died of the shock when told of the misfortune that had befallen her daughter.'

A genuine shudder of horror and disgust ran through the whole of the company. The ball at the Embassy was for the moment forgotten. The General looked at his audience with a bitter smile of satisfaction, as if to say: 'Have I made good my words?'

'After all, is it true, this story?' asked a gentleman priding himself upon his scepticism. 'Is it not a mere hoax, concocted by a practical joker?'

'It is unfortunately true enough. The victim and her father have lodged a complaint, and adduced witnesses in support of it.'

'Witnesses?' said Valerian inaudibly, and turning ashen gray.

'Witnesses attesting the disappearance of the young girl,' the General went on; 'witnesses attesting her absence, her return in the manner I told you. Besides, the proprietor of the tavern has been apprehended.'

Valerian's heart gave a loud thump. He dared not speak.

'What did he say?' asked the sceptic by profession.

'Not much. He has not given the names of the delectable triumvirate. He pretends not to know, and he may be speaking the truth. He admits having seen a woman, who was being carried upstairs by three officers,

but those gentlemen often bring strange company which affects still stranger manners.'

'Hence your Minister of Police knows virtually nothing?' asked Countess Gretzky.

'Virtually nothing, except the name of the young girl. It is Raïssa Porof.'

'Raïssa Porof,' repeated Valerian to himself. The name was henceforth to be the companion of all his thoughts.

'What will be the upshot?' asked a lady.

'Heaven alone knows. The miscreants may succeed in baffling detection; but if they are found, they are likely to pay dear for a sorry escapade.'

'It is positively infamous,' exclaimed the Countess. 'Valerian, I charge you with the task of finding those officers. To what regiment do they belong, General?'

'I am sorry to have to repeat that they wear the uniform of Count Valerian's regiment,' replied the old soldier, bowing slightly to the nephew of his hostess.

'It is not you, perhaps, Valerian?' asked the bantering voice of a young lieutenant, a distant relation of Count Gretzky. Everybody laughed and looked at Valerian, who, with a very faint smile, replied:

'I don't think so.'

'They shall be found,' exclaimed the Countess. 'If this young girl is not an impostor, enacting an ignoble comedy, then she is a victim, deserving of the deepest interest and sympathy.'

'But suppose she is an impostor?' asked the sceptic.

'In that case she will rue it very bitterly,' broke in the Countess warmly. 'But until we are certain, this scandal must not be hushed up. Public morality, not to say decency, cries loudly for vengeance.'

When the Countess got excited she could be very

eloquent. She went on speaking for a few moments, at the end of which she had converted everyone to her views. The professed sceptic alone persisted in emitting some doubts. He received a severe reprimand in one sentence from the Countess.

'A sceptic is a proselytizer who wishes to make no converts, for the plurality of adherents plays havoc with his singularity,' she said. 'Your trade, Baron Braschkine,' she went on, 'is to doubt everything and to deny the rest. We know this, and when volunteers are wanted for some heroic but absurd forlorn hope, you become a "mental exempt," as the recruit of four-foot six is physically exempt.'

The Countess had the laugh on her side this time. The topic was allowed to drop, and a quarter of an hour later the drawing-room was comparatively empty. Valerian had departed unnoticed. His head swam as he descended the staircase, and he had to hold on by the banisters to keep himself from falling. He drew his fur cloak closer around him and went into the street, where his sledge was waiting. But he did not get into it. He simply told his coachman to follow him, and stepped out in the direction of the Neva. For full an hour he perambulated its banks in the darkness of the night, scarcely illuminated by the flicker of a few gas-lamps. The stream, lying white and silent beneath the heavy pall of ice that held it bound, was on Valerian's left; at the right was the embankment, with its traces left by the skates of the winged sledges, glistening like so many dazzling ribbons beneath the dark vault of heaven. The traffic grew gradually rarer; the black masses of the leafless trees in the Summer Garden stood out threateningly beneath the fitful, lurid blaze of the wood fires, around which a few coachmen were still assembled in front of the French

Embassy; the weird shadows of animate and inanimate subjects, assumed more fantastic shapes, until at last Valerian Gretzky crossed a tiny bridge, which spans the canal, and tramped on along the quay, where he disappeared into black night. He had, however, succeeded in composing his thoughts.

CHAPTER VI.

She had informed against him, she had denounced him —him, Count Gretzky—she, the pretty dark-eyed girl, so terrible in her anger, but insignificant, after all—this nobody, sprung Heaven knows whence. She had described him, his uniform, his voice. She had told all she knew, and perhaps on entering his apartments he would find the police ready to apprehend him.

A shudder of disgust shook the young officer from head to foot, as if he had received an ice-cold douche. In another moment he uttered a strident laugh. What if they did apprehend him? What could they do to him, Count Gretzky? Put him under arrest for an indefinite period, and that was all. He was in no way afraid of a severer punishment. Beside, they were three, and the question was, which of the three had Raïssa denounced? Had she seen the face of him who had followed her into the dark room? Did she know to which of the three she owed her dishonour? Had she, to make assurance doubly sure, or to make revenge sweeter still, denounced all three?

Time would show, for, unfortunately, Gretzky was unable to seek direct information. The attempt to do so would inevitably draw the authorities' attention. He was bound, therefore, to exercise patience, to use both

eyes and ears, to ferret about in order to get to know as much as possible, for it would not do to trust to some subaltern. That idea could not be admitted for a moment. As it was, he thanked his stars, or, rather, the proprietor of the Red Tavern, for his discretion.

Another image crossed the thoughts of the young man —that of the young girl of whom he had scarcely caught sight. He had thought her pretty at the time—surely she was virtuous! Others might take her to be an impostor and adventuress; in his own interest he would not undeceive them, but he knew too well that she had been innocent—pure as driven snow. Had he not heard her cry and implore in accents which would have moved anyone but a brute?—yes, a brute! And he was a brute at that moment, because he was wretchedly and unmistakably drunk.

But even in his drunkenness the impression had forced itself upon him of the chastity of this child, of her innocence in revolt, of her savage anger, which had vainly sought a weapon to kill her ravisher—or herself—and in his inmost heart Gretzky said to himself that the bold step by which Raïssa proclaimed her own dishonour in order to obtain justice was that of an honest girl, refusing to accept in silence an outrage which she has not deserved.

Nevertheless, would it not be possible to buy the girl's silence, or, if not hers, that of her father and friends, by the bait of a fortune—a large one, if necessary? Ah, there was the rub; could that silence be bought? If he could but succeed in having the information withdrawn, the noise of it would soon die out.

'The devil take the chattering ape, for bruiting about the particulars of the affair,' muttered Valerian to himself. He was consigning to similar perdition the Minister of Police, who admitted such people to his sanctum, and

who imparted to them reports concerning the doings of the pick of the nobility, because, in spite of this 'melancholy escapade,' as they called it at his aunt's, Valerian had not ceased to consider himself as belonging to the pick of the nobility.

By this time he had reached the end of the quay; it was terribly cold, and the driver, who had followed his master, had not failed to remind him of his presence from time to time, by a loud cough. Valerian made up his mind to get into his sledge. He felt inclined to go and see his two friends before returning home, and consulted his watch to that effect. It was very late indeed.

'Home,' he said to the coachman, and ten minutes afterwards he entered his cosy den, adjoining his bedroom. The first thing that struck his view was a letter, lying on his writing-table. He tore open the envelope; the letter only contained four words: 'Come at once —Rézof.'

CHAPTER VII.

For a moment Valerian stood staring stonily at the sheet of paper, and at the four apparently unimportant words, which to him, though, seemed big with the gathering storm; then, without taking time for further reflection, he went downstairs again.

'I am going out,' he said to the hall-porter, who ran to open the door for him.

'Shall I call for your Excellency's sledge?' said the obsequious servant.

'No, I am going to walk.'

The outer door closed behind the young man, who

immediately got into a hackney sledge standing a few yards off. Five minutes afterwards he was at Rézof's.

The latter, very excited, was striding up and down his study. Sabakine, seated on the couch, looked very glum, his chin supported by his hand.

'Well,' quoth Gretzky, for the sake of saying something, because doubt was no longer possible.

'Well, the devil himself fights against us,' growled Rézof, interrupting his perambulation. 'We have been denounced, that is all.'

He went to the door to make sure that no one was listening, let down the velvet curtains, and came back to his friends.

'We have been denounced,' he repeated, lowering his voice, 'and Heaven alone knows how we shall get out of it.'

'Have we been denounced personally?' asked Gretzky in a calm voice. He looked very pale, but absolutely unmoved.

Gretzky's friends, on the other hand, appeared to have lost their wits.

'Not personally,' came Sabakine's answer. 'But that is merely a question of hours. Nothing can save us from being recognised, or from being betrayed by something or someone. Curse it!' he added, jumping up and stamping his foot.

'If our names are not known as yet, there is no need to worry over-much,' remarked Gretzky; 'and we may manage to nip the thing in the bud. Besides, there is no need for you to worry at all. Am I not the only guilty one?'

The two young men stared at Valerian in surprise, and, without having consulted each other by word or sign, came simultaneously up to him.

'No, Gretzky,' said Rézof, 'you are not more guilty than we are; at least, we meant to be not less guilty, consequently——'

'As we shared the deed, so we shall share the punishment,' concluded Sabakine.

The two young officers held out their hands to their comrade, which the latter grasped firmly in his.

'This is simply ridiculous,' he said with deep emotion. 'I cannot accept such a sacrifice. I'll go and give myself up, and have done with it.'

'Then I will go also,' said Rézof.

'And so will I—I pledge you my word I will!' exclaimed Sabakine.

For a moment the three remained silent, standing in the middle of the room. Gretzky was evidently reflecting.

'My dear boys,' he said at last, 'let me take the thing upon myself. We shall have to give the girl a marriage portion, and hush the matter up. You'll not mind my pointing out to you that I am considerably better off than you are, and, besides, I am considerably more guilty also. It is merely a matter of a fortnight's close arrest.'

'A matter of a fortnight's close arrest, is it?' said Sabakine. 'It is a matter of being reduced to the ranks, nothing less. The Colonel has said that he means to make an example.'

'The Colonel, the Colonel!' sneered Gretzky; 'it's all very well for the Colonel to talk, but they don't cashier an officer of the Guards for a mere peccadillo. Just as if he had never made an ass of himself!' He stood musing for a moment, then went on in quite a cheerful tone: 'Don't look so glum, both of you, there's no occasion! Heaven be thanked, we have still mothers and sisters and aunts to intercede for us. For instance,

you, Rézof, you have a sister who is in with all the big-wigs; could not you quietly send her to the Minister of Police, to hush up the affair? Could not she point out to this amiable gentleman the harm it would do to the nobility if the affair were noised about? Every lady's-maid whom we have happened to take round the waist or kiss would lodge an information against us. You may laugh if you like, but it is no laughing matter. I am perfectly serious in what I tell you. "The honour of the flag is at stake," as my uncle the Admiral would put it. And now that I come to think of it, your uncle, Sabakine, he is a Minister; why not ask for his protection? You never ask him for anything. You conscientiously spend your own fortune, interest and capital alike. He can't refuse you so small a favour.'

'And you yourself,' retorted Sabakine, 'haven't you your aunt, who is lady-of-honour, and who has more influence at Court than anybody?'

'Hush!' said Gretzky, putting his fingers to his lips in a serio-comic way. 'My virtuous aunt is on the side of the oppressed; if she meddles with the affair it will be to have me punished, and to reinstate the damsel. It is of no use to think of my aunt.'

'The damsel, the damsel!' growled Rézof; 'the stuck-up minx——'

'Don't say that, old fellow,' said Gretzky. 'Assuredly it is not her fault. She stoutly defended herself; I still bear her marks.' He tucked up the sleeve of his shirt and showed a long deep scratch above his wrist, scarcely healed. 'One thing is very certain, that we were dead drunk, or, rather, mad drunk,' he went on, pulling down his cuff—'mad drunk, which is the worst form of drunkenness, and the most spiteful. We might have killed someone.'

'Wish to God we had!' muttered Sabakine.

'Thank God we haven't! That would have meant Siberia, and I prefer to part with a dowry for the girl. To the point—is it your uncle, Sabakine, or your sister, Rézof, who is going to hush up the affair?'

'It would be better to employ a woman, I think,' said Sabakine. 'It looks less serious than a man, especially a Minister.'

The two officers burst out laughing.

'Clever lad, that Sabakine,' said Gretzky; 'he won't risk his credit with his uncle.'

'He is right,' said Rézof: 'I'll see my sister in the morning.'

'Before we leave one another,' said Sabakine, getting up, 'let us agree to one thing. Neither of us, on no matter what pretext, will betray the others. We accept the responsibility of the thing in common, just as we committed it.'

Gretzky wanted to protest; Rézof cut him short:

'We are a set of idiots, but we are men of honour; we may forget ourselves to the extent of committing an action unworthy of us, but the honour of the regiment and the bonds of friendship before aught else. Hence, we are mutually responsible for this as for everything else. Let us swear to stand by one another to the end.'

'I swear!' said Sabakine, holding out his hand.

'I swear!' repeated Gretzky, clasping the loyal hands of both his friends.

They immediately left, promising to meet in the morning at the barracks. Gretzky, when he got home, went to bed at once, but, do what he would, the vague image of Raïssa kept him awake.

CHAPTER VIII.

At nine in the morning Rézof was at his sister's. The latter, a very handsome woman, had married half a score of years before an immensely wealthy court official; through her position and connections she was on terms of intimacy with the best of Russian society. The early visit of her brother surprised her somewhat, and she had him shown into her dressing-room, where she was finishing her toilette. Princess Alexandrine, whom her friends called Adine, was a sharp observer, so she had no need to look at Rézof twice. Rézof, who had slept badly, looked pale and ill; it was enough to make her guess the secret he had come to confide to her.

'So you are in it?' she said to him point-blank in French.

Rézof merely nodded his head. The Princess dismissed her maid, and made her brother sit down on the couch beside her.

'And who beside you?' she asked eagerly.

This scandal was the most delicious windfall St. Petersburg society had had for some time.

'I can't tell you, Adine,' replied Rézof. 'You must excuse me. It is a secret that concerns the honour of the whole regiment.'

'Very well,' said the Princess, somewhat piqued. 'Then why do you come to confess yourself to me?'

'Because you can save me if you like. A word from you to the Minister of Police——'

Adine pursed up her mouth.

'You know that he is paying me a good deal of attention?' she said.

Rézof nodded his head significantly.

'And you want me to ask a favour?'

'Not a favour. Simply point out to him the fatal effect of allowing the middle classes to attack the nobility.'

'She belongs to the middle classes, then?'

'Not exactly; non-hereditary nobility acquired in the army.'

'Indeed,' sneered Adine. 'And what, in the name of all that is good, could you see in this girl? Is she pretty, at any rate?'

'Don't talk to me about it, I beg of you; the recollection of it is particularly disagreeable to me.'

'Behold the consequences of youthful folly,' said Adine, shrugging her shoulders comically. 'The game was not worth the candle. And what do they want to do to you as a punishment—provided that also be not the secret of the regiment?'

'They want to reduce us to the ranks.'

'Reduce my brother to the ranks for a mere nobody? Ridiculous!' exclaimed Adine. 'I'll go to the Minister of Police, depend upon it. And you do not wish me, at the same time, to intercede for your comrades—your respectable comrades?'

'On the contrary, I beseech you not to separate us in your benevolent intervention.'

'Without knowing their names? What a simpleton I am, after all,' she checked herself. 'Just as if the Minister would not tell me.'

'I doubt whether he knows.'

'Not even yours?'

'Not even mine.'

The Princess leant back, laughing heartily.

'Then I am virtually denouncing you.'

'On the distinct understanding that the inquiry shall be stopped.'

'Delightful, the most original thing I have heard for some time,' said Adine. 'Very well, brother, I'll go between one and two—you'll have my answer at three. Don't wish me luck—sportsmen say it has the contrary effect.'

Saying which she sent her brother away with a pretty nod of her head in order to finish dressing.

CHAPTER IX.

A FEW hours later the Princess sent in her card to General Kline, the Minister of Police. The latter hurriedly dismissed two or three petitioners, and told the usher to show his visitor into his private reception-room.

'You, my dear Princess,' exclaimed the minister, kissing Adine's hand with old-fashioned courtesy.

'Myself, General, and what is more, I have come to solicit an interview.'

'Wonders will never cease. Perhaps you have been robbed?'

'Now, General, that is really too bad of you,' said the Princess, assuming her most fascinating air. 'You can conceive no other motive for my asking or granting you a few minutes' conversation except a robbery, or something of the kind?'

'I did not dare to hope——' murmured the Minister.

'Don't hope, I pray you,' retorted the Princess, in a dry tone that immediately brought her interlocutor to his senses.

The effect was not lost upon the Princess, who immediately began to ensconce herself in a comfortable chair,

and to gracefully arrange the folds of her dress over her tiny feet. Having finished these preliminaries, she turned her eyes full on her victim.

'Guess what brings me here, General?'

'You have forbidden me to guess,' said the General, rather sulkily.

'Not at everything.'

The words were accompanied by another dart which positively made the warrior wince, but he dared not advance.

'I shall be obliged to help you,' said the Princess. 'Very well then. They say a great deal of harm about us poor women, do they not, General?'

'That depends,' came the answer.

'Never mind; they do say a great deal of harm about us, and they are not always wrong. Your sex, which is perfect, of course pretends that we are coquettes, and flirts, and so forth.'

General Kline, who was not so stupid as his friends made him out to be, cast a side glance at his visitor.

'I understand,' the Princess went on. 'My sex does flirt sometimes, and is fond of admiration always, and they have logic on their side, for you must admit that without this craving for admiration, without this coquetry, you would spend some very dull days.'

'I don't think so,' cooed the General, holding out his hand for that of Adine, but he only got a slight rap on his extended digits in return.

'Yes, we are coquettes, we are whimsical, we are inquisitive.'

'That is pure calumny!' exclaimed the General, objecting to the last count of the indictment.

'It is Gospel truth,' concluded Adine; 'and proof of it is that I came to see you from sheer curiosity.'

The General's countenance fell at this frank admission, but another irresistible glance, shot strategically from under the *lorgnon* of the Princess, implied that capitulation on her part might be reckoned among the possibilities, and that her sorties were undertaken for 'honour's sake,' and not for the sake of stubborn resistance.

The besieger took heart, and was somewhat put off his guard. The Princess followed up her momentary advantage and boldly asked to see the report, which, according to her, the whole of St. Petersburg knew already by heart. After a but faint objection, General Kline left the reception-room, and in a few moments returned with the document in question.

'You are simply charming!' exclaimed the Princess, laughing. 'And now you must go away while I read this. You must spare my blushes.'

There was another skirmish, and then Adine was left alone once more, the condition being that she should give three smart raps at the door when she wished the General to return. Twenty minutes sufficed to peruse the whole, at the end of which the Princess gave the signal agreed upon.

'It is dull beyond conception,' she said, as the warrior entered the room, 'and,' flinging the sheets on the table, 'disgusting besides.'

'I warned you to that effect,' meekly objected General Kline.

'My dear General, I do not mean what you mean. I am not so strait-laced as all that. When I said "disgusting," I was alluding to the pretensions of these people.'

'The officers, you mean?' said the General, endeavouring to reduce the sheets to order. Receiving no reply, he looked up, and was astonished at the positive sneer that had settled on the Princess's face.

'Really, General, you are too provoking, or else you are trying to make fun of me.'

'I fail to grasp your meaning.'

'You fail to grasp my meaning? Well, I'll try to help you. Here we have three young men, the very pick of our aristocracy.'

'That is by no means proved,' ventured Kline.

'Allow me; it is very much proved indeed. To dare do what they are accused of having done they must be the "first among the foremost." No officer, except one of a crack regiment, would have had such an idea.' The General nodded assent, and the Princess went on: 'Well, then, here we have three young men belonging to the first families in the land denounced like so many footpads—by whom—by whom, I repeat? By a nobody, by a clever hussy, a brazen-faced adventuress, perhaps!'

'The inquiries made about the family turn out highly satisfactory,' observed the General.

'What does that matter? What, in heaven's name, will become of us if these people begin to sit in judgment on us, to condemn us? Our servants will take up the cry, and the day will come when we shall be obliged to account to them.'

The General was thoroughly amused at the Princess's excitement, as he would have been at a cleverly enacted play; nevertheless, he held up his hand to intimate that he did not altogether agree with her pessimistic views as to the future.

'I tell you, General, that it is positively immoral—yes, immoral, to punish young men of good family. The reverence for things venerable is already sufficiently on the decline; there is no need to hasten this decline by examples set in high places.'

The General looked fixedly at the Princess. The

latter, on becoming aware of it, suddenly changed her tone.

'Besides, it is positively ridiculous, this hunt after those three young men who have melted into air without leaving any trace. Have they left any traces?' she asked.

'We are trying to find some,' evasively said the General, still on his guard.

Adine gave him a glance, which was intercepted by one from the General. Finding her battery unmasked, she tried another.

'I will not have these young men hunted down,' she said in a low tone, very calm, but very determined.

'And why?'

'I have told you. The whole of the nobility will be in league against you if you pursue this affair. I have sufficient friendship for you to warn you in time. If you cause these three young men to be punished, every door will be closed against you.'

'Every one?' asked the General, looking furtively at the Princess.

'Every one,' firmly replied Adine. 'The culprits are somebodies, there is no doubt of that. They are well connected. They have a great many male friends, a great many more female ones'—she laid particular stress upon the last words—'and we'll protect them. It is a question of honour.'

'And what about the girl,' quoth the Minister of Police; 'is it not a question of honour with her?'

The Princess shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

'What do these people know about honour? It is a question of money with them—a marriage portion, a good marriage portion.'

'Who will provide it?' asked Kline, still feeling his way.

'It will be provided by public subscription,' replied Adine, laughing; 'we'll all contribute our share, and you'll head the list. Come, General, I am sure you will give a hundred roubles to keep up the honour of the St. Petersburg nobility.'

'I'll give whatever you like in order to please you,' replied the General; 'but it must be anonymously. You understand this well enough, don't you, Princess?'

'Then I'll have none of your gifts,' said his visitor, with a very comical air of disdain; 'the fun of the thing would have been to see your name figure on the subscription-list. You refuse? I am sorry, but, being of a generous disposition, I'll bear you no grudge. We'll give the girl a handsome marriage portion. That's agreed—isn't it?'

Kline did not answer at once. The reasons advanced by the Princess were such as to appeal to any and every member of the aristocracy. On the other hand, his duty, strictly speaking, was to pursue his inquiries.

'Remorse is already gnawing at your heart,' said Adine, laying her statuesque hand on the arm of the Minister. 'I undertake to dispel your remorse. Come and dine with me this evening. My husband is on duty. After dinner we'll talk matters over quietly.'

She caught up her muff and boa, which she had flung on a chair on entering, tightened her bonnet-strings, and with two or three smart taps arranged the folds of her velvet gown.

'The marriage portion will be forthcoming at once,' she said, going leisurely towards the door. 'You must look out for some decent intermediary—a woman used to that kind of thing. I'll see you this evening, General—shall I not?'

'I may perhaps not be able to come to dinner, but I'll

look in in the course of the evening,' diplomatically replied the General, accompanying her as far as the door. Then he came back and stood musing in the middle of the room. 'A clever minx,' he said, almost aloud. 'She probably wants to get her lover out of a scrape. After all, she is right; this scandal would do us harm, and supply a formidable weapon to the lower and middle classes. How very pretty she is—very pretty indeed! And the nobility is a very praiseworthy institution in itself; it is of the utmost importance not to undermine it. I think she is right—I am sure she is.'

The Minister of Police went back to his own room, rang the bell, and gave orders to suspend the 'Porof Inquiry' for the present.

CHAPTER X.

THE particulars of the private council held on that same evening at Princess Adine's were never fully known, not even to the principal actors in the drama that was being slowly unfolded, least of all to Peter Porof and his daughter Raïssa.

On the evening after that of the conclave the latter were sitting silently opposite one another in the small dining-room, still full of flowers and buds. The place of the dead mother remained unoccupied; the armchair seemed, as it were, to await her return to resume her seat at the head of the table. The father and daughter had changed nothing in their habits of the past; to them that armchair was tenanted—the image of the dear departed hovered over the ingle-nook, and whenever the looks of the survivors turned towards it their craving to be revenged became more strong and more bitter. It

was not only Raïssa's honour that had to be vindicated, but also the death of the mother of the family, struck down before her time by mortal despair.

On that day the father and daughter had, as usual, paced up and down the Newski Perspective and the principal thoroughfares at the hour when Society took its walks abroad; the tall and elegant figure of Raïssa, her deep mourning, the snow-white hair of the old man who accompanied her, the evident unconcern at the worldly comedy enacted around them which pervaded both their looks, had drawn forth many curious remarks and inquisitive glances from the promenaders.

Beneath these glances—beneath the haughty stare of the women, the impertinent admiration of the men—Raïssa had remained perfectly unmoved. She did not even notice them. She was on the alert for a sign—a gesture of, a resemblance to, three men of whom she had scarcely caught sight—of three men confusedly mixed up in her mind. She would have recognised them together—she was not sure of recognising them separately; and beneath her crape veil she scrutinized every face, compared every gait, to come to the despairing conclusion every now and then that she should not find them.

The walk on that day had been prolonged beyond the usual time; when Porof wanted to go, Raïssa had said, 'Not yet.' It was only when the street lamps had been lighted, when the promenaders had one by one disappeared from 'the English Quay,' when night had thrown her pall on the ice-bound Neva, that the young girl had reluctantly turned her face homeward. Even then she stopped frequently to carefully examine the occupants of the splendidly-horsed sledges that flashed past, carrying the great ones of this earth to brilliant dinners or mere

family gatherings, to fitly wind up the laborious idleness of the day.

Raïssa had come back discouraged. A week had elapsed without her having discovered a trace, however faint, a resemblance, however slight. She was fast yielding to despair, and at times asked herself whether she had not attempted a mad thing, a task beyond her powers—she, the poor, obscure girl, against a world determined to dispute her revenge foot by foot. She poured out the tea in a listless manner, and her father, who dared not question her, was looking at her despondently. Every now and again, endeavouring to shake off her grief, she smiled at him, but her smile was more heartrending than her blank gaze. The painful silence was suddenly broken by a ring of the bell. Porof got up, expecting to see one of the rare friends who still visited them in misfortune. The servant came in.

'There is a lady who wishes to speak to Mademoiselle Raïssa.'

Raïssa looked up. Since the burial of her mother not a single female visitor had crossed the threshold of their modest home.

'Who is it?' she asked.

'The lady will not give her name; she has a message for mademoiselle.'

The father and daughter looked at one another for a moment.

'Show her in,' said Raïssa, getting up at the same time to light another candle in order to make the room somewhat more cheerful.

Then they waited, but not long, because almost immediately afterwards their visitor appeared. It was a woman of about fifty, dressed in a dark gown and shawl,

the bright colours of which had faded. The bonnet and its ribbons presented a scarcely more creditable appearance—in fact, the whole of the 'get up' matched very fairly with the features of the wearer. It was one of those faces which do not stamp themselves indelibly on one's memory, the recollection of which is always more or less blurred, but which still make one say: 'Where have I seen this face before?'

'Pray take a seat, madame,' said Raïssa, taking stock of her visitor.

Since her misfortune she watched everyone and everything very closely.

The visitor took the seat offered to her, and put the small morocco bag she had been carrying on her knees. Then, in a voice as dim, as vague, as the whole of her appearance, she began to speak.

Her first words made the father and daughter look at one another very significantly; the glance was so subtle, however, as to be lost upon the speaker.

'I have come,' she said, 'on the part of a lady, or rather of several ladies, but of one specially, who takes a great interest in you.'

It was that sentence that produced the effect just mentioned.

'From what I have heard,' the visitor went on, 'you have had the misfortune, mademoiselle, of recently losing your mother.'

Raïssa nodded assent.

'The ladies I alluded to have been told how worthy of esteem and sympathy you are; they have commissioned me to see you in their name.'

'Who are the ladies of whom you are speaking?' asked Porof, in a grave tone of voice.

The visitor turned her face full upon him.

'They are ladies very highly placed—charitable ladies, whose particular mission it is to do good.'

'We want for nothing,' said the old man sulkily.

'I am afraid I am explaining badly, for you do not appear to understand. The good these ladies endeavour to do is not merely material, it is moral also. I am often charged to console the bereaved and afflicted, and I can assure you that——'

Here she stopped short, and cast a furtive glance at the noble face of Raïssa, for she instinctively felt that she was on a wrong tack. She changed her course.

'You have had a severe trial, mademoiselle, and it is on that account that I have been sent to you. I have been told that you have presented a petition.'

'We have not presented a petition,' curtly replied Porof, 'we have lodged a complaint.'

'It comes to the same thing,' observed the visitor.

Raïssa looked at her father, but the latter did not notice the look. He was steadfastly staring at their visitor. Raïssa did the same.

'You have lodged an information against three young men belonging to the best society. Have you carefully considered what you are doing?'

Raïssa was about to answer. Her father held up his hand, and she kept silent. Receiving no reply to her question, the old woman felt compelled to go on.

'Your cause is no doubt the noblest and most deserving of sympathy. There is no one but feels as you do, but——'

'But?' echoed Porof, seeing that she was going to stop.

'But you are fighting this battle alone, and you have the whole of the nobility against you.'

'I understood that you had been sent by some charitable ladies who take an interest in our present position?' quoth the old man quietly.

'True, but they are ladies, and I need scarcely say that they are not ladies who are at the heads of the Government departments.'

'Then I may take it that the ladies are with us, and that the Governmental departments are against us?' asked Porof, not a muscle of his face moving.

'I said nothing of the kind. I have simply said that it is not the women who make the laws; the laws always protect men, and in this particular instance more than in any other. What interest would you have a man take in a misfortune which he can neither understand nor fathom?' Seeing that no one answered, she went on: 'If I had had the pleasure of knowing you when you decided upon this step——'

'Which step?' asked Porof.

'The lodging of your information,' replied the visitor imperturbably. 'If I had had the honour of being among your friends, I should have strongly persuaded you to do nothing of the kind.'

'Indeed,' said Porof calmly, and seeing that Raïssa was ready to bound off her chair, he simply smiled at his daughter.

The smile had not been lost upon the old woman, who cast a sidelong glance at the old man.

'Yes,' she said slowly, 'it was ill-advised to make a scandal. A scandal never does any good. Look here' —this in a very honeyed tone—'let us suppose—it is scarcely likely—that they find the authors of this outrage. Let us furthermore suppose that the Courts will give a verdict in your favour. Even then the damages they will award you will after all be very insignificant.'

A shudder ran through both father and daughter at the last words; they succeeded in mastering their indignation without its being noticed by their visitor, who went on:

'Unless I am mistaken, you have no private means?' she said to Porof.

'None whatsoever,' answered the latter.

'In that case you have done a thing which, concerned as I am with your welfare, I have no hesitation in qualifying as exceedingly imprudent. You have made your daughter conspicuous, and in a way which, to say the least, will prove very unpleasant to her. She will have great difficulty in finding a match.'

'She has no intention of getting married,' quietly replied the father, placidly stroking his knee with his right hand.

'Indeed!' exclaimed the woman. 'Well, it is a curious coincidence that these ladies should have thought of it in the same way, and—considering that you are not likely to obtain much satisfaction—they have commissioned me to ask you whether you would not like to leave the town where you have suffered so many unpleasant things and to settle in the country.'

'We have no country house,' replied the old man, continuing to placidly stroke his knee.

'There happens to be just at this moment a pretty little country villa for sale in one of "the governments" on the banks of the Volga. It is a magnificent country, a nice property; there is excellent fishing, there are splendid forests, and I am certain you would be very comfortable if you liked——'

'I have no money,' said Porof.

The old woman waved her hand, as if to intimate that this was a matter of detail. It was the first sign she

gave of being something more than a mere mouthpiece, and it argued that she felt herself on more solid ground.

'The money will be found,' she said insinuatingly.

'Would you like to live in the country?' said Porof to his daughter.

The latter, pale as death, her hands tightly clasped, seemed as if under the influence of magnetism. She slowly raised her magnificent eyes, looked fixedly at her father, and did not answer.

'If you would prefer to live in some provincial town,' said the old woman in a conciliatory tone of voice, 'there would be no difficulty.'

'Would you like to live in a provincial town?' asked Porof in a cheerful tone.

His daughter shook her head.

'Let me tell you, mother,' said Porof, in an offhand, bantering way, 'that people are apt to promise a great deal and to perform very little.'

The old woman, without being in the least frightened by the unceremonious appellation, opened the small bag she had on her knees.

'Such is not the case with us,' she said; 'we keep our promises. And in proof whereof, here is the money; a handsome dowry indeed for our young lady—a dowry with which she may marry anyone she likes. Fifteen thousand roubles.'

'Fifteen thousand roubles!' repeated the old man, stretching forth his hand. 'Fifteen thousand roubles! It is indeed a large sum. You might indeed choose any husband you like with such a sum as that, Raïssa, mightn't you?'

He took the pocket-book, in spite of the evident reluctance of the old woman to part with it, opened it, and began fingering the notes.

'And there are really fifteen thousand roubles there?' he asked.

'Yes, papa,' cooed the visitor, 'that is the exact sum; but you will have to sign for it.'

Porof sprang to his feet and pushed back his chair so violently as to upset it. Raïssa had anticipated the movement.

'Fifteen thousand roubles for the honour of my daughter!' he yelled, waving the pocket-book over his head. Then he threw the money at the face of the old woman. It did not, however, reach its destination, for she dexterously caught it in its flight.

'Out of my sight, you wretch—you pander!' he roared; 'out of my sight, or I'll kick you out!'

With one bound the old woman was in the small passage, fumbling for her fur cloak, without, however, leaving hold of her precious bag.

'Away with you!' thundered Porof.

'Let me put on my cloak, papa; I shall be frozen to death if I don't,' whined the old woman.

Porof took her by the shoulders and pushed her out into the street.

'Do freeze to death!' he yelled. 'What does it matter?'

The cook came hurriedly on the scene with the fur-lined goloshes of the old woman, which she had forgotten in her flight. Porof opened the door at once and flung them into her face one by one. Unabashed when once out of danger, the old woman leisurely put on her 'overshoes,' wrapt her cloak cozily round her, and disappeared.

When Porof returned to the sitting-room he found his daughter still standing in the same position, erect, silent, petrified as it were.

'Raïssa,' he said gently.

The young girl turned her face, pale as death, towards her father.

'It appears that your honour is worth something, seeing that they want to buy it. We'll avenge it, never fear.'

Raïssa made a movement as if to put her arms round her father's neck, but she dropped senseless on the floor.

'Great heavens, she is dead!' shouted the cook, rushing in.

The father, bending over the prostrate form of his daughter, placed his hand on her heart, which was still beating.

'No,' he said, after a second or so, 'she is not dead; we'll bring her to. She is my daughter,' he added proudly; 'and she will not die while she is not avenged.'

And, in fact, in a very few minutes Raïssa recovered. She broke into violent sobs, but they relieved her feelings sufficiently to enable her to resume her accustomed promenade next day. When Porof, however, went to the Central Police Office to make inquiries with regard to his information, he was told that the police had discovered nothing.

'Nothing?' said the old man pointedly.

'Nothing,' replied the official drily. 'We have got something else to do than to look out for hussars. There has been a robbery of sacred images from a church yesterday. Such a thing has never happened before. That's something interesting, if you like.'

'I suppose it will be useless to call again?' asked Porof in a placid way; and, when in reply the official shrugged his shoulders, Porof took the matter quite calmly. 'In that case I have the honour to wish you good-day.'

'Good-day,' said the official; and when the outer door had closed upon the old man he added, 'and good

riddance. The old idiot!' he continued; 'there was no occasion to kick up the dust as he did the first time he came here. We all thought he was going to break the place down, and then all at once he turns tail like a dog that has been beaten.'

After having delivered himself of this little speech for the benefit of the four walls, he resumed his writing.

When Porof got home he took his daughter into his arms, told her what had happened at the Central Police Office, and wound up by saying:

'Don't give way; we still have the Emperor to go to.'

CHAPTER XI.

Porof had said, 'We still have the Emperor to go to,' but it was easier said than done, for various reasons. The difficulty was to get to the Emperor. Porof knew very well that it was absolutely forbidden to accost the Emperor, no matter under what pretext, in public. The thing seemed hard; Porof was aware, though, that without this interdict the Czar's life would be a misery, and his promenade, elsewhere than in his private grounds, or at night, a myth. Secondly, Porof suspected that the old woman's principals would not remain inactive under their defeat, that they would not fail to set a watch upon their enemy's doings; for that they considered him their enemy he had no doubt. So he kept coy for several days.

He was not mistaken. Gretzky had been but too glad to contribute lavishly towards Princess Adine's scheme, and his comrades had not been behindhand. When their money was returned through the same intermediary that had hatched the plot, when furthermore

they heard an amplified and by no means unembellished account, at secondhand, of the treatment by Porof of Adine's emissary, they set their spiés to work. The latter, in spite of their fertile imagination, could give no news. Whether Porof was aware of their presence in his neighbourhood or not, it was impossible to find out. Certain was it that neither he nor his daughter stirred from home. Equally discreet inquiries brought to light the fact that the information lodged by him had remained in the pigeon-holes of the Ministry of Police, but that the plaintiff having ceased to refresh the memories of the officials to that effect, nothing had been done, and that his name was not as much as mentioned.

The three young men felt a weight lifted off their hearts; even Gretzky. The image of Raïssa was, however, constantly present to his mind—sometimes threatening, sometimes imploring, but at all times supremely beautiful.

Nevertheless, when a fortnight or more had elapsed without the slightest allusion having been made in the society he frequented to the 'affair of the Red Tavern,' even Gretzky became less haunted.

Porof meanwhile had very cautiously, but very resolutely, gone to work. He meant to get to the Emperor without risking his liberty, and for a poor devil like himself it was a difficult thing to do. He began to inquire the names of all the ladies having free access to the Imperial couple. In a short time he had made his selection from amongst them, and his choice fell upon none other than upon Countess Gretzky, of whom he had heard a great deal of good.

The way Porof set about his task was thus. While serving with the colours he had made the acquaintance of a non-commissioned officer, who, at his discharge, had

obtained a post in the Imperial Palace itself. He resumed his intercourse with the man, taking care, though, not to tell him that he was the Porof whose name had been on the lips of every member of the aristocracy for at least forty-eight hours. By these means he managed to penetrate to the servants' quarters, and by dint of listening attentively, Countess Gretzky's name became firmly fixed on his mind as the sole resource in his dire emergency.

One day, then, the Countess on the way to her carriage found herself intercepted respectfully by a gray-headed old man, standing on the steps of her mansion. There was no need to look at him twice to perceive that he was no ordinary petitioner. The Countess was not only good and charitable, but a reader of character. What was more, she considered all men as her fellow-creatures, allowing for the difference of rank and education. She did not consider the male portion of humanity as absolutely created for the purpose of administering to the whims and fancies of the other portion.

Noticing the supplicating, but by no means humble, look of the old man, she stopped.

'You wish to speak to me,' she said softly.

'Madame,' said Porof, drawing himself up, 'my name is Peter Porof; I am the father of the girl outraged at the Red Tavern.'

'Take the horses to the stable; I shall not go out,' said the Countess to the footman waiting with his hand on the door of the carriage. Then, turning to Porof, 'Pray come in.'

Countess Gretzky went in, followed by the old man, whose heart throbbed violently with emotion. When once in her own apartment she looked at her visitor still more carefully than she had done in the street. Like all

philanthropists working single-handed, the Countess had often been imposed upon, and she had in consequence become somewhat suspicious. Her first question went straight to the point.

'How is it that this affair has been allowed to drop?' she asked.

'It has not been allowed to drop, madame,' came the answer; 'but we cannot get justice, and what is more, there has been an attempt to bribe us into silence.'

Once more the Countess looked at Porof, and this time all her suspicions vanished. The proud, but at the same time simple bearing of the old man had produced its effect, and Porof felt as much.

'What did your daughter say to that?' asked the Countess.

Porof's eyes filled with tears.

'She said nothing. She dropped lifeless to the floor, but only when the old hag that came to make the offer was gone. During the interview she never spoke a word, she never winced, lest she should betray me, for she rightly guessed that I wished to draw the woman out. She is a good girl, and of a noble disposition.'

'Is she pretty?' asked the Countess. If Raïssa had been plain, the sympathy of the great lady might, perhaps, have been less lively.

'Raïssa is my daughter, and it does not become a parent to praise his child,' replied Porof; 'but, really, Raïssa is pretty.'

The Countess was lost in thought for a moment, then asked another straightforward question:

'Was she in love with someone?'

'No, madame,' said Porof frankly. 'That trial has at least been spared to us. She was in love with no one. She is a young girl who knows nothing of the world and

its evil ways. Her mother had brought her up very carefully.'

At the recollection of his wife Porof's features showed deep emotion, which he mastered almost immediately. The Countess noticed it, and was all the more disposed in his favour. They talked for more than an hour, the Countess scarcely able to conceal her surprise at what she heard, Porof becoming more and more eloquent by virtue of his very simplicity. At last the Countess rose to intimate that the interview was at an end.

'Look here,' she said, 'all that you have told me is of the greatest importance. Come and see me to-morrow, and bring your daughter with you.'

'I will do as you wish, madame,' said Porof, also rising; 'but may I be allowed to ask one favour?'

The Countess's suspicions were aroused once more. In spite of herself, she dreaded a request for pecuniary assistance, which would have cruelly disenchanted her.

'What is the favour?' she said.

'That you should speak to no one of the interest you are kind enough to show in my daughter.' Seeing the look of surprise on the lady's face, Porof went on boldly, 'Excuse my plain speaking, madame; you are aware that those for whom we are looking belong to the aristocracy; they have already succeeded in stopping the inquiries of the police; if they suspected that I am pursuing the affair it is no longer money they would offer: they would manage to get one or both of us—my daughter and myself—out of the way. Those who are sorely tried, madame,' added the old man, seeing a look of incredulity on the Countess's face; 'those who are sorely tried, madame,' he repeated, 'are naturally mistrustful. We are very unhappy, madame, so you will pardon my fears, which are, perhaps, wholly imaginary. But be persuaded,

madame, that if anyone knew your interest in us, the criminals would never be discovered.'

Porof's tone was so confident, and the Countess felt so convinced of the truth of his words, that she granted his request.

'I will do better still. You shall not give your name to the servants. Come to-morrow morning with your daughter and you shall be at once shown in. And now good-bye. Do not lose heart.'

When Porof was gone, the Countess sat musing for a while. She asked herself whether she had not placed too great a faith in this stranger. His request for secrecy was calculated to breed suspicion. Still, having promised to keep silent, she made up her mind to keep her promise. She had not promised, though, not to make some indirect inquiries, so she ordered her carriage to be brought round and went, just as a matter of course, to call upon two or three ladies of her acquaintance. Her first visit was to a former lady-in-waiting of the Empress, an old dame, as deaf as a post, and consequently not at all posted up in matters worldly. She stayed but a few minutes. The second visit was to Princess Adine.

The latter was neither deaf nor dumb, but she had every reason not to let her tongue wag too freely, a fact of which Countess Gretzky was not aware. Nevertheless, a kind of inborn diplomacy, enhanced by her long experience of the world, told her to be very cautious. The Countess may furthermore have thought that Rézof belonged to the hussars, that he was handsome Adine's brother, that one or more of his friends might be mixed up in the affair. If so, it would be an additional reason for making the Princess talk.

At first the conversation ran only upon the topics and fashions of the day, upon the charity ball at the nobility's

Assembly Rooms, upon the abstraction of the sacred images, and then, by a movement most skilful from its apparent simplicity, the Countess drove her hostess into a corner.

'It is to be hoped,' she said with a deep sigh, 'that the police will be luckier or cleverer this time than with this affair of the Red Tavern. You know the affair that happened about a month since——'

The Princess tossed her head.

'Our dear General Kline has not distinguished himself in this instance,' continued the Countess, who was well aware of Adine's flirtations in that quarter. 'Strange that he should have allowed himself to be beaten. Nothing has come to light, I believe?'

'Nothing,' said the Princess.

'Not to be able to lay one's hand upon one out of three persons is not giving proof of great skill. People say that he is pretty well played out.'

Adine fell into the trap.

'The idea!' she exclaimed, somewhat excited. 'He is more active than ever.'

'I am glad to hear it,' said the Countess benevolently. 'It is no doubt this miscarried affair that makes people say these things.'

'What things?'

'That he is getting played out.'

'And where do they say these things? At the Winter Palace, I suppose?'

The Countess shook her head to protest, but Adine was on her mettle.

'You may deny as much as you like; everybody knows that you can be as silent as the tomb. It is a strange idea to blame a man because he has not succeeded in—— Do you want to know my candid opinion, Countess?

Well, I am convinced that the whole of this story of the Red Tavern is nothing more or less than a horrible hoax.'

'Do you think so?'

'I repeat, I feel convinced,' said Adine emphatically. 'I have got proofs that neither this girl nor her father exists save in the imagination of the "reds." It is one of their inventions to attack the nobility and to do us harm. The father is a pasteboard figure, and the daughter a mere doll, "with real eyes," as they say in the toy shops.'

'Then you feel sure that——'

'That they have not found the criminals, because there has been no crime,' concluded Adine, leaving Countess Gretzky no time to finish the sentence. Then, somewhat less vehemently, 'You perceive well enough that the General could not do better than he has done.'

'I am delighted to hear it,' said the Countess, rising. 'Besides, there was a better proof than all this, and much closer at hand.'

'Which?' asked the Princess, eagerly accompanying her visitor to the door.

'The fact of his paying you so much attention, my charming friend,' said the Countess, smiling. 'Everyone knows that you are not the woman to tolerate the attentions of any but a very superior man.'

Princess Adine swallowed the narcotic—for such it was—as if it had been so much honey; but the effect only lasted for a moment, because the door had scarcely closed upon her visitor before she came to the conclusion that the latter had played her game very clumsily.

The Countess, on the other hand, summed up the result of her visit in a few words:

'One thing is positive,' she said, when seated in her neat brougham, 'she has either a friend or a relative

mixed up with the affair—perhaps both.' Then she laughed almost aloud. 'It is quite a pleasure to attack your friends, Princess, for you know how to defend them.'

CHAPTER XII.

NEXT morning Porof, accompanied by his daughter, was shown into the Countess's boudoir. The old man could scarcely master his emotion, for he felt that the success of his cause would depend upon this interview. Raïssa, on the contrary, was perfectly calm, a stranger would have said 'indifferent.' An expression of haughty disdain had settled on the face which, from being simply pretty, had become majestically beautiful. The lips had assumed an imperious curve, the eyes seemed as it were to defy the stare of the crowd, every trait appeared to have undergone a refining process. In times gone by the girl would have hardly been noticed; at present the passers-by stood still or looked back, asking one another, 'Who is she?'

At one glance the Countess felt that she was not being confronted with an adventuress. The somewhat bearish simplicity of the father had inspired her with confidence; the sight of Raïssa inspired her with respect; the respect due to every great misfortune, not deserved by its victim.

'Pray take a seat, mademoiselle,' said the great lady, pointing to a chair.

Raïssa obeyed, the classical folds of her black cloth dress drooping round her as round a statue. The Countess was wondering where this girl could have learnt the usages of society to be so simply elegant and imposing at the same time.

'How old are you?' asked the Countess, addressing Raïssa, with a kindly smile in order to make her feel at home.

'Nineteen,' replied Raïssa, lifting her limpid dark eyes to the Countess's face.

'Who has educated you?'

'My mother.'

'You have not been at school, then?'

'No, madame; I have had some lessons at home. My mother did the rest.'

'I suppose you speak several foreign languages?'

'French and German only—but not very well.'

'Do you play?'

'Yes, madame. I was studying in order to teach in my turn.'

'And now——?' asked the Countess, not without having first turned over the question in her mind.

'Now, madame, I should find no pupils, even if I were ill-advised enough to look for them.'

All this was said very quietly, and still the Countess felt that she had received a lesson. But, being of a noble disposition, instead of resenting it, the dignified bearing of the young girl only increased her respect for her.

'Your father has acquainted me with the steps he has already taken,' she said, after a short pause, 'and also with the results, or rather want of results. I should, therefore, wish you not to think me merely inquisitive or rude in asking you what do you expect to gain by all this?'

'Justice,' said Raïssa.

'No doubt. But what do you call justice?'

'The punishment due to this infamous act,' replied the young woman calmly, and scarcely raising her voice.

'And for yourself, you no doubt wish for something. It would be but natural. What do you expect?'

'Nothing,' answered Raïssa—'nothing at all.'

The Countess scanned her visitor's face very attentively. This answer seemed so improbable to her, that she could not believe her own ears.

'Nothing!' she repeated. 'Still, you said just now that you would find no pupils.'

'It is a great misfortune—an irreparable misfortune; but it's no good trying to reform the world.'

'But,' objected the Countess, 'more and more surprised, 'how are you going to live?'

'We'll leave St. Petersburg after we have obtained justice; the Emperor will perhaps give us leave to change our name. We'll settle somewhere in the provinces, where no one knows us. I'll find something to do.'

'In a family, perhaps?'

Raïssa proudly raised her head.

'No, madame, not in a family. How could I possibly deceive honest people? I'll do needlework or embroidery, it doesn't matter much which. My father has a small pension.'

The Countess kept silent for a moment. Porof, meanwhile, was looking at her with a confident air. The straightforward simplicity of his daughter's answers caused him visible satisfaction.

'Still, mademoiselle,' resumed the Countess, 'before this misfortune you had a career open to you; you had a living within your reach; you might have got married . . . while now . . . Well, you yourself perceive the difficulties with which you are surrounded. This being the case, would it not be perfectly natural that they should give you some compensation for the wrong caused to your material interests?'

'It would be the price of my shame!' exclaimed Raïssa, trying to master her indignation. 'No, madame, we'll have none of it. We have already refused it.'

'You'll allow me to point out to you the enormous difference there is between a sum of money offered in secret, in order to buy your silence, and damages awarded by a tribunal, by a—superior authority, to use the right word.'

Raïssa shook her head.

'It is not money I want, madame; it is the punishment of those who have ruined my life.'

The Countess kept silent once more. She was evidently turning over the whole affair in her mind. Then she spoke.

'Well, mademoiselle, seeing that you only want your due, we'll endeavour to get it for you.'

Porof's eyes filled with tears, and in the impulse of his gratitude he rose from his chair, caught the hand of their protectress, and carried it to his lips; after which he somewhat awkwardly resumed his seat.

The Countess went on:

'But have you considered what the nature of this punishment may be? Tried in a simple police-court, or even before a higher tribunal, this punishment might have been comparatively mild. I say comparatively mild in view of the enormity of the offence. At the hands of the sovereign, before whom I mean to lay your complaint, this punishment may be exceedingly severe. No one can foresee the verdict. It may attaint the guilty ones in their rank, in their fortune, in their liberty. Have you considered this?'

'And what about me, madame?' exclaimed Raïssa, rising from her chair pale with indignation, quivering with anger. 'What about me, madame? Have they

considered how I have been attainted; I, who until then had lived with my parents, heeding nothing but my duties and my studies? They have brought into my life the recollection of an hour too horrible to speak of—of a stain, an insult, which nothing can blot out. I, who had no thought of evil, they have flung a stain upon me that sullies my most innocent thoughts. They have ruined me by blasting my fair name; they have sentenced my old father to wretchedness and privation; they have taken away the last ray of sunshine, the last scrap of hope that might have cheered his remaining years. They have shattered my life; I shall never be a wife—I shall never be a mother. I shall die unwept for, alone, and without a hand to close my eyes, without a pair of lips to breathe a prayer over me. The wretches! they have killed my mother, who died of very shame, and you talk to me of pity for them! Ah, madame, if you did not understand that I want justice, and that I hate them with an invincible, irreconcilable hatred, it was not worth while to receive us—to look at us with so much kindness.'

Raïssa had remained erect, facing the Countess, her eyes flashing with an almost unholy fire, her cheeks pale as death, her lips quivering. Nemesis herself could not have looked more terrible than she did in her 'trappings of woe,' that fell around her in sculptural folds. Her father, standing a few paces away from her, looked tenderly and respectfully at his child so cruelly tried. Raïssa had never laid bare her heart in that way; since the day of the crime she had kept silent with regard to her own feelings, leaving her father to act, supporting him by her presence and approval, but without breathing a syllable to enlighten him as to her inmost thoughts. To him, therefore, as well as to the Countess, Raïssa's words

were a revelation of the secret tortures at which they had only guessed.

The Countess impulsively caught Raïssa's hands, and drawing the young girl towards her, imprinted a motherly kiss upon the marble brow.

'This, child,' she said, 'is the expression of an honest woman's sympathy. Every mother should plead your cause, for, indeed, if a young girl's honour is neither protected nor avenged, men will simply let their passions run riot. You may rely upon me; your cause shall be pleaded and heard in the highest quarter, and there is no doubt that you will get justice.'

Both father and daughter bowed deeply before their protectress, who rose.

'Dispose of me as you will,' she said graciously. 'Do you want for anything? Can I advance you any money?'

Porof shook his head.

'We have sufficient for our needs, madame; besides, no money should come from you to us. It would spoil everything.'

He was about to lead away his daughter when the Countess stopped him.

'Would you know them?' she asked Raïssa, without otherwise designating the guilty ones.

'I am not certain,' replied Raïssa. 'Heaven knows, I have already tried.'

'Try again,' said the Countess, 'until we meet again.'

She came back to her room, while Porof and his daughter slowly descended the marble staircase.

At the moment they set foot on the shallow flight of steps beneath the glass awning, a sledge, drawn by a magnificent black horse, stopped below. A young man, muffled up to his eyes in his fur cloak, sprang lightly from it. Mechanically, as was his wont, Valerian

Gretzky looked at his aunt's visitors. A cold shudder ran through him at the sight of Raïssa. The latter had simply stared at him on account of his uniform, partly visible beneath the mantle when the wearer alighted. Did she read the terror of being recognised in the young man's eyes? Did she guess at his features beneath the drawn-up collar? She never knew herself, but with one long shudder she stood motionless.

Gretzky made up his mind after a moment's hesitation to come up the three steps, and passed in front of her. The magnificent hall porter was already holding open the door; he entered, and the door closed behind him.

'Father,' said Raïssa in a whisper, placing her hand on Porof's arm, 'father, it is one of the three men.'

'That officer?'

'Yes, I am certain of it.'

Porof opened the door and stepped into the hall, where he met the porter.

'Who is that handsome officer that went in just now?' he asked in an offhand way.

'That officer,' said the servant, with deep emphasis, 'that officer is the nephew of our lady, Count Valerian Gretzky.'

Porof went back to his daughter.

'It is the Countess's nephew,' he said.

Raïssa stood still for a moment, apparently making up her mind to something. Then she spoke.

'We must not tell her. Let us go. We'll find him when we want him.'

CHAPTER XIII.

GRETZKY felt fidgety enough, but managed to hide his feelings from his aunt. After the first salutations he could, however, hold out no longer.

'Who were the people I met as I was coming in, aunt?' he asked, trying to look unconcerned. 'I mean a woman in mourning, accompanied by a dapper, wiry old man?'

The Countess remembered, in the nick of time, that the guilty ones belonged to her nephew's regiment, and that out of sheer *esprit de corps* Valerian might put a spoke in her wheel, if he suspected her intentions. So she answered cautiously:

'They are poor people whom I am trying to befriend. I have got numberless *protégés*, as you know. Scarcely a day passes but what some of them come to see me.'

Valerian did not dare to ask what kind of protection his aunt accorded to those he had just seen; besides, as a rule, the Countess made no mystery of her plans, and she would have spoken freely of any new crusade, had there been one. The young man, therefore, concluded that there was no danger. In spite, however, of this consoling idea, he cut his visit short, and felt sad at heart and preoccupied for the remainder of the day.

When he got to the barracks he found Rézof, whom he acquainted with the incident of the morning.

'Are you sure that it was she?' asked the latter, somewhat sceptical by nature.

'Sure, sure—one is never sure.'

'Unless one has proofs,' retorted the other. 'You have no proofs, so you are not sure. Very well, then, seeing that there is a doubt in your mind, just describe

this interesting person to me a bit; for, upon my word, it is rather strange to be compromised to such an extent and to be unable to recognise her for whom one runs such terrible danger.'

'You are always chaffing,' said Valerian peevishly; 'if you had seen her, as I have——'

'Thou speakest truly, comrade mine,' said Rézof, using the 'thou' to emphasize his banter. 'Thou speakest truly. Thou art the lucky dog, and we are thy miserable accomplices, shaking like aspen leaves. Still, thou mightest condescend to tell us if she is pretty, our—nay, thy—charmer.'

'I do not know whether she is pretty. All I know is that she has eyes that are enough to wither one.'

'The deuce she has. Then we had perhaps better get out of the way. What sayest thou to a short trip to foreign lands?'

'Don't be an ass. A likely thing, indeed, at this time of the year, with the "Spring Review" on the cards. The Colonel would not give us leave.'

'You are right,' said Rézof, 'so we must take our chance. Still, you might get rid of this doleful face of yours. Don Juan as you are, you look like the statue of the Commander.'

Gretzky was about to turn on his heels, vexed at this constant chaff, when his friend stopped him.

'Come to my sister this evening, to the "divine Adine," as General Kline calls her. My sister is on the best of terms with the Minister of Police. You need not open your eyes so wide when I say on the best of terms. I simply mean that she can twist him round her finger,' he added, describing sundry curves in the air with his index finger. 'He sits blinking and smacking his lips like a cat looking at a jug of cream on a shelf beyond its reach.

Too high, my friend; but go on blinking and smacking your lips. Illusion, after all, affords many joys when you cannot have the reality.'

Gretzky could not help laughing. Nevertheless, he thought that the cat often jumped so high as to upset the jug of cream, but he kept his thoughts to himself, and did wisely.

Late in the evening, however, he went to the Princess's, who was 'at home' every Monday after the Italian opera, which meant any time between 11 p.m. and 3 a.m. There was no dancing, merely supper, but there was flirtation on a colossal scale. Adine was above suspicion, as well as her friends, male and female; and if now and then a pretty little jug of cream happened to be upset by a too venturesome cat, the despoiler and the booty were ruthlessly ostracized.

'I say, Adine,' said Rézof, catching his sister in the doorway of her reception-rooms, 'just fancy, one of us is under the impression of having recognised the innocent victim; you know whom I mean.'

'One of you; then it is not you?'

'Alas! no. I do not know her sufficiently to recognise her.'

The mock doleful mien of her brother caused the Princess to stare at him. Then she dealt him a smart rap with her fan on his hand, adding:

'You are not so clever as I thought you were. But who is the lucky individual who has the right to recognise her?'

'That, sister mine, is the secret of the story, the mystery of the drama; we have taken a mutual oath not to betray one another. The ceremonial accompanying the pledges was more imposing than that of the three Swiss conspirators in "William Tell" and that of "the

Blessing of the Daggers " in " The Huguenots " rolled into one. So, rather than reveal it, I would meet my death on the scaffold.'

He had struck a mock-heroic attitude, and was declaiming so loud as to attract the notice of General Kline. Seeing that it was only the Princess's brother, the high dignitary's frown relaxed, and he walked up to his hostess.

'General,' said Rézof at once, feeling that he must do something desperately foolish, 'General, have you ever heard of criminals who denounced themselves in order to divert the suspicions of the police?'

The General nodded his head dubiously. That kind of ruse, according to him, was too dangerous to be frequently employed.

'Well, General, you may look doubtful, but there are such criminals, I pledge you my word. Take me, for instance. I was just going to beseech you to lock me up for the night; and if I make a clean breast of the thing, it is solely in order to escape from my victim, who is pursuing me.'

'Is that a fact?' said the General, with a condescending smile, and trying to fall in with the joke. 'Who is your victim?'

'A woman—a—wo—man,' repeated Rézof, in a tone of voice that made his listeners burst out laughing, for by this time there was a group around the three principal personages. 'General, I beseech you save me, if only for this night. I am afraid of her recognising me.'

'I suppose you met the lady at a masked ball?' said the General, smiling.

'Something like it. And look here,' exclaimed Rézof, almost as drunk with the effect of his own words as he was drunk with champagne on the day of the crime,

'look here, there is Gretzky, who is in the same boat with me. We are pursued by a woman.'

Gretzky, pale with anger and apprehension, met as well as he could the glances cast on him for a moment—for a moment only, because everyone was watching Rézof. The latter was on the point, perhaps, of committing some irremediable blunder, when his sister, alarmed at his imprudence, pinched his arm so violently as to make him cry out. It, however, brought him back to his senses.

'What did I tell you, ladies and gentlemen?' he laughed; 'my sister is pinching me mercilessly. Oh, those women! those wo—men!'

Supper was served; the company, still highly amused, took their seats, and the conversation turned to other topics. Gretzky had slunk away, and gone home very angry and very uneasy. As he opened the door of his bedroom—but dimly lighted by a small alabaster lamp, suspended from the ceiling—he was startled by the sight of a dark figure crouching on one of the chairs. He made sure that it was Raïssa, but the figure did not budge. Then he went into the hall, and lighted a candle. With faltering steps he approached the chair. It was only a new fur coat, brought home by the furrier that same evening, and which the valet, in his hurry, had stuck there.

Cursing his cowardice, the world at large, and himself into the bargain, Gretzky went to bed. But rest refused to come. He had a horrible nightmare, in which Raïssa played the dual part of the avenging and protecting angel.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE following evening Countess Gretzky, who was generally in attendance upon the Empress twice or thrice a week, was sitting in one of the private rooms of the Winter Palace, in company with the Sovereign and two or three ladies. The conversation was not very animated, but not very dull. Etiquette was absolutely banished from these gatherings, and replaced by a delightful courtesy, somewhat pedantic, perhaps, but which excluded neither sprightliness nor liberty of opinion. All at once there was a long pause.

'An angel has passed over us,' said the Empress at last, alluding to a Russian proverb in connection with those sudden periods of silence that frequently occur in conversation. 'An angel has passed over us, so now it is the turn of an angel to speak. We are waiting for you, Countess.'

Countess Gretzky smiled.

'Alas! madame, I can only speak of the things of this earth.'

'Very well; tell us one of your stories of charity. It will soothe our minds after so many stories that are not charitable.'

The Countess felt instinctively that the right moment had come to speak about Raïssa.

'If I dared,' she said. 'It is not a story of charity that I would tell, and still it is worth listening to.'

'We are all attention,' said the Empress, leaning back in her chair.

'Once upon a time,' began the Countess, 'there was a young girl who lived with her father and mother in one of the outskirts of the capital. They were honest, but

exceedingly humble folk, who had instilled into their daughter a love of duty. She was a good, innocent girl, clever in her way——'

'Was she pretty?' came the interruption.

'Yes, she was pretty; but these people were very poor, so that the young girl had reached the age of nineteen without finding a suitor. She herself never thought about marriage; her sole ambition was to be able to give piano lessons, in order to support her old parents, and, above all, her invalid mother. One evening, on returning from her music lesson, a very extraordinary thing happened to her. A troïka with three young men in it passed through the deserted street; the three young men were drunk. They also thought her pretty.'

All at once there was a slight stir; the Emperor had come in. With a wave of his hand he intimated to the Countess to go on with her story. He took his stand facing her, and the narrator resumed, addressing herself particularly to him.

'They thought her pretty. They carried her off in spite of her cries, and took her to a place where they were certain of not being disturbed. When the girl came back to her home she had lost her all, for her all was her honour. Her mother died of grief. That is my story, and I beg to apologize for not having chosen a more lively one.'

'But the story is not finished,' said the Empress. 'What happened after that?'

'Nothing that I am aware of.'

'Where did this happen?' asked the Emperor, in a stern tone of voice.

Countess Gretzky kept silent.

'When and where did this happen?' requested the Sovereign, still more sternly.

The Countess rose from her chair, bowed before the Emperor, and said in a firm voice:

'At St. Petersburg, on the 12th of last month.'

The ladies looked aghast at one another. Every one of them knew the story. It became a question how the Emperor would take it.

'Countess,' he said, 'please to follow me.'

He made an almost imperceptible sign to the Empress, who led the way immediately to an adjacent room, where her husband and the Countess joined her.

The latter told the details as far as she knew them. Her particularly clear mind rendered her invaluable help in a matter like this; she omitted nothing, exaggerated nothing, and her well-known quickness of perception, her invariable sound judgment, had won for her the confidence of the Imperial family.

When the Emperor had checked the accuracy of her facts by a brief but rigorous cross-examination, he considered for a moment.

'These men must be found to-morrow before mid-day,' he said at last. 'You mentioned, Countess, that they belong to the Hussars of my Guard. The report is at the Ministry of Police?'

The Countess replied affirmatively.

The Emperor sent for someone on whom he could depend, gave him his orders, then turned to his consort:

'You will find, dear wife,' he said, 'that I also know how to protect your sex. What would you do under the circumstances?'

'I should be pitiless to the guilty,' replied the Empress.

'Well said; I am entirely of your opinion.' Then, turning towards Countess Gretzky, 'I thank you, Countess, for having drawn my attention to this iniquity.

One can, unfortunately, not see everything for one's self, and one is often badly served. It is both an honour and a blessing to the throne, to be supported by such hearts as yours.'

They returned to the drawing-room, where the conversation had by no means flagged during their absence. But everyone seemed pre-occupied and the gathering soon broke up.

CHAPTER XV.

NEXT morning an astounding piece of news spread like wildfire through the capital at an early hour. The Minister of Police had been deposed overnight, and the officers of the Hussars of the Guards had been summoned to the orderly-room—and 'all this,' as the aristocracy said, 'for a mere chit of a girl, a nobody, who had lodged information about an imaginary wrong.'

Before mid-day had struck St. Petersburg was divided into two camps—that of the Raïssists and that of the Hussarists. There was already a fair beginning of personal attacks even among friends.

Princess Adine, who went to rest very late, and who, as a consequence, seldom rose before twelve, got the news from her husband. To say that the latter did not infuse a touch of spitefulness in his account of the calamity that had befallen General Kline, would be misrepresenting human charity. Assuredly the Prince did not for one moment entertain the thought of Kline having injured him in the affections of his handsome wife; still, one is not disagreeably excited at seeing a brick drop on the head of him who covets your property.

Adine took the news with sublime indifference.

'Do you mean to tell me that he has been removed?

Poor fellow! but in that case I have done with him, seeing that he will no longer be able to supply me with news. Who takes his place?'

The husband could not help laughing at the funeral oration; he told his wife that the name of Kline's successor was as yet not officially known, and departed to make inquiries.

When he was gone the thought struck Adine that her brother must be mixed up with all this. She rang for her maid, who informed her there and then that the officers had been summoned to barracks. This latest tidings set Adine's doubts at rest. The hand that had dealt the blow remained unknown, but this was not the right moment to worry about it.

She dressed hurriedly, and went to her brother's. The latter had been sent for by his Colonel by a special letter, and had gone out without leaving instructions. She returned home to await events, unable to do aught else, and her servants thought that the day was hanging heavily on their hands.

Nor did the Colonel of the Hussars find his very short. He had been awakened in the middle of the night by an order from the Emperor. Immediately after the interview, the letters convoking the officers had been despatched. But when he saw them all standing in his presence, his heart failed him, for he loved his regiment. He was not only a good soldier, but a capital old fellow besides. His sole mistake had been to remain a bachelor —it was this error that had been the first cause of a laxness of morals among the young officers he commanded. The thing had generated into systematic debauch. Nevertheless, however serious, no one could or would hold him responsible for the harm done. It was not on his own account that he felt uneasy.

'Gentlemen,' he began, trying to steady his voice, 'our regiment has a bad reputation with regard to morality, and I am bound to confess that I have not done all I might have done to improve this state of things. Many among you have had escapades of no great consequence, and which, for that reason, I have overlooked, when it was my duty to punish them. To-day I am cruelly punished for my weakness, for I shall have a very painful duty to perform towards you. A very grave fault—it is said, a crime—has been committed a month since on the road to the Red Tavern. The Emperor has been apprised of it. He means to make an example, and his formal orders are that the three culprits shall be handed over this day. If not, the whole body of officers will be degraded alike. I may as well tell you at once that I consider myself bound by your resolution, and that I intend to share your fate, whatever it may be.'

Thereupon he put his hand to his forage-cap, and wanted to go, but he was surrounded and plied with questions, which he refused to answer.

'You know your duty,' he said. 'As for me, I have only to be told your decision, and to convey it to higher quarters.'

With this he went out, refusing to hear another word.

Left to themselves, the officers began to vent their anger in various ways. Were they a parcel of school-girls, to have morality thrust down their throats by force? What would become of them if the authorities took it into their heads to meddle with what did not concern them?

Amidst this tumult Gretzky in vain endeavoured to obtain a hearing, but when the shouts of indignation had somewhat subsided he managed to speak. Sabakine and

Rézof had placed themselves by his side to support him, according to their oath. .

'Gentlemen,' began the young officer, 'there is no occasion to make all this noise. The only thing we must all regret is that supreme authority has deemed it necessary to threaten where a simple order would have sufficed. You are absolutely disinterested in this affair. I am guilty, and as such denounce myself.'

'We are guilty,' repeated Rézof and Sabakine, 'and we denounce ourselves.'

The declaration was received with profound stupor. It was they who had done this thing, and they had concealed it from their comrades. But the three young men remained utterly callous to the reproaches flung at them. The case was too serious to mind such trifles.

Not but what the culprits were exceedingly liked, for, in another moment, the officers unanimously objected to three of their number being held responsible for what any party among them might have done, if the opportunity and the champagne had been forthcoming.

'This is all very well,' said Rézof. 'In the abstract I do not for one moment doubt your capability to do as much; in the concrete, you have not done so, hence you must allow us not only to father the fault, but to stand the punishment.'

This very reasonable language, coming from such a madman as Rézof, was eminently calculated to astonish his hearers; and, in fact, it produced no other effect.

'They want culprits,' exclaimed a captain, the senior by his age as well as by his periodical freaks; 'very well, we'll produce them, and more than are wanted, and then we'll see whether they will not think twice before cashiering the pick of the Guards.'

In spite of the objections raised by the three young

men, a messenger was despatched to the Colonel, and the staff of the regiment constituted itself prisoners of its own accord.

* * * * *

That was how things stood when Raïssa and her father, sent for in hot haste by Countess Gretzky, made their appearance at the mansion. The success of the Countess had somewhat overshot its mark; she would have been satisfied with a less signal revenge, though she was perfectly easy with regard to her nephew, whom she believed to be a very steady young man, because he had never been drunk in her presence. Nevertheless, she was not blind to the fact that so sensational and severe a punishment was not calculated to be particularly acceptable to the aristocracy. No doubt Countess Gretzky felt deeply moved by the sufferings of humanity at large; she had run the risk of alienating the friendship of many in taking up Raïssa's cause, but she had run that risk cheerfully, as being solely responsible for this step. But now that the interests of a goodly section of the nobility seemed to be at stake, that the *esprit de corps* appeared to be mixed up with the affair, that the whole staff of a regiment was being proceeded against, the kind lady came to the conclusion that her success had been too great.

Still, she received Porof and his daughter very kindly, and had breakfast served to them, of which, however, they did not touch a morsel. Her house being at a stone's-throw from the Palace, she told them to remain, and to await the decision of the Emperor. The father and daughter, a prey to emotion too deep for words, did as they were told. When the door had closed upon the Countess, when the muffled sound of the wheels of her carriage on the hard snow had ceased, they remained sitting motionless in the magnificent armchairs of the

yellow drawing-room, their hearts throbbing violently—their lives, as it were, hanging upon a sentence.

Of the two, Porof bore his anguish less stoically. His wiry, though by no means robust frame, had borne the fatigues of his profession well enough. He had gone through several campaigns with credit to himself; his wounds had given him more or less trouble, which he had manfully faced; but what with gathering age, the death of his wife, and the calamity that had befallen his daughter, his remaining strength was fast getting spent. While his daughter's honour remained unavenged, he would certainly not give in—Raïssa felt that well enough—but when justice had done its work, she knew that he would collapse at once, like a horse dying in harness.

And she could not help asking herself what she should do when her father was gone. During the last month her mind had ripened by suffering; she had taught herself to calmly face any and every thing—nay, she had made up her mind to expect the worst under any circumstances. The idea, therefore, of imminent total isolation was constantly present to her. 'Whatever happens,' she said mentally, looking at her father huddled up in his chair like one who has abandoned all hope, 'whatever happens, there will always be the convent to which to fly.' The convent, which meant the first tomb before real death set in, which meant the renunciation of everything that makes life delightful and happy, which meant an eternal farewell to everyone dear, to relatives and friends. But Raïssa would have no relatives, no family; her friends had deserted her, and love was henceforth interdicted to her.

And as she sat musing—maybe, brooding—thus, she sadly went back to her past dreams of the future, as the imagination of the pure young girl had shaped them.

The picture had shown her a small house, somewhat larger and more comfortable than that of her parents. It had shown her a presentment of herself, standing on the threshold with a babe in her arms; in the distance a handsome, stalwart man, her husband, striding quickly up the street, in order to join them the sooner after the labour of the day. Poor dreams! lowly ambitions! alas! they had been dispelled, like everything else, by this one cruel blow.

She was suddenly awakened by the sound of carriage wheels crunching the snow in the street below. Porof rose as if moved by a spring. He reeled, and would have dropped to the ground but for Raïssa, who had got up also, and had caught him in time.

The Countess appeared, pale and panting; she drew a deep, long breath, then turned to Raïssa.

'Will you be able to recognise those who insulted you?'

Raïssa remained silent for a moment. She felt sure of being able to recognise at least one of the three men, the nephew of the Countess, and she asked herself whether she should inflict this sorrow on the woman who had done so much for her.

She hesitated for a moment only. The image of her dead mother rose up before her, and put an end to her scruples.

'I can,' she said in a firm voice; 'at any rate, I think I can.'

'Then come,' said the Countess, with a nervous twitch of the lips which betokened a painful resolve. 'Then come, and point them out yourself to the justice of the Sovereign.'

She almost dragged Raïssa along with her. The girl looked back.

'And my father?' she gasped.

'I have no orders concerning him,' replied the Countess reluctantly.

'Then for the love of Heaven, take him with you, madame. Remember what he would suffer if left here by himself.'

The Countess assented with a nod. The three got into the carriage, which in a few moments brought them to the barracks. They ascended the few steps that led into the great hall, and found themselves confronted at once by the officers, standing in a row—silent, threatening, their scabbard frogs hanging empty by their sides. The Colonel and the new Minister of Police, an active and intelligent man, who had hitherto remained in obscurity to come suddenly to the front at this critical juncture, were awaiting their arrival with feverish impatience.

At the same time the chaplain of the regiment entered by a door facing them.

Every eye was fixed upon Raïssa. Pale as death, but thoroughly self-possessed, she bore the brunt of the cruel looks of all these men. The three culprits alone abstained from adding this insult to the woman they had wronged.

The priest slowly advanced towards Raïssa.

'In the name of the Creator,' he said solemnly, 'and dismissing from your mind all anger and thoughts of vengeance, in order to fitly obey the behest of our father the Czar, you swear to point out faithfully and to the best of your knowledge those of whom you have cause to complain?'

'I swear,' said Raïssa, without wincing.

'Then do it, and may the Almighty be with you!' the priest exclaimed. At the same time he stepped aside, and Raïssa stood alone.

The day was already on the wane, but the wan light

from a snow-charged sky filtered through the lofty, wide windows, the white blinds of which had been drawn up to their fullest height. Every face was turned towards Raïssa, every face was courting inspection, as it were, a different expression on each, but all equally painful to the girl. She felt her courage forsaking her, and reeled back.

With the bound of the tiger who sees his prey escaping him, Porof stood by her side, and wrung her hand.

'Obey the order of the Czar,' he said aloud. Then he dropped her hand, and retreated.

This time Raïssa did not falter. She strode up to the officers ranged in line. Her looks wandered over the whole, showing hatred in every line of their faces, with the exception of two, Sabakine and Gretzky. She did not fear that her memory would play her false, as if by a miracle it had become more intense still.

'This one,' she said, stopping before Sabakine. Then she moved a step. 'This one,' she said, pointing to Rézof, who stared her full in the face with a look more insulting than a blow would have been. The girl shook from nape to heel, and flung him back his insult. Rézof's head dropped on his breast; he felt ashamed at having been humiliated by a woman. Long before that Raïssa had recognised Gretzky. A feeling for which she could scarcely account herself had prevented her from pointing him out. She was debating with herself whether she should do so. Yes, a strange, a very strange and altogether new feeling in her lacerated heart caused her to avoid the look Gretzky cast at her.

'If it were he,' she sighed to herself; 'if I could be but sure that it is he——'

What would she have done? Would she have pardoned had she been sure that the outrage came from

him? She had no further time to reflect, for the Colonel's voice suddenly broke the silence.

'And the third?' he asked.

Without daring to lift her eyes, Raïssa slowly stretched out her arm towards Gretzky.

'This one,' she gasped almost inaudibly.

A sudden cry in response to her movement rent the air. Countess Gretzky stood almost immediately by her side.

'You are mistaken, are you not, mademoiselle? It is not this officer whom you wish to point out?'

'Alas! yes,' replied Raïssa, but so softly that her words were scarcely heard. Her head had drooped, and she looked more guilty than the man who had wronged her.

'Great Heavens! what have you done?' exclaimed the Countess, as Valerian drew near and attempted to kiss her hand. 'You have sullied your name; you have committed this horror; you——' Overcome by violent sobs that almost choked her, the Countess could say no more.

Then the Colonel addressed his officers.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'I hope your conduct will be pardoned in consideration of the fraternal attachment to one another of which you have given proof. It is a noble trait in your character, though in this instance you may have carried it beyond reasonable limits. You are free. As to you, gentlemen,' turning to the three culprits, 'you will proceed immediately to the Winter Palace, where you will be informed of the fate awaiting you.'

Thereupon the three young men immediately left the hall.

At the door of the barracks Raïssa and her father found a carriage ready to convey them to the Winter Palace.

The Countess would have gladly abandoned the accomplishment of a task which, under the circumstances, became nothing short of a martyrdom to her, but the order had gone forth, and she could but obey.

Hence, after a few minutes, the actors of the drama were once more in each other's presence, this time in the palace of the Sovereign himself. The Emperor had already been informed of the names of the three criminals. A few more minutes, very painful to all those concerned, and the Emperor appeared.

His first look was directed towards Raïssa, and told in her favour. The beauty, the dignified bearing of the young girl made the offence, if not less excusable, at any rate more grave. A mere slut would certainly have deserved less pity than this handsome girl, worthy of being the guardian angel of a bright home, worthy of occupying an honoured place in the world.

'Which of you is most guilty?' asked the Emperor of the three officers, in a stern tone.

'It is I,' courageously said Gretzky, lifting his head; but at the same moment the words were re-echoed by his companions.

The Emperor, in spite of himself, could not help admiring this indomitable devotion, but he refrained from expressing his feeling by either word or look.

'It is you, mademoiselle, who must enlighten us. Which is the one who has committed this outrage on you?'

'I do not know,' said the young girl. The cheeks that had remained pale since the day of the crime were this time suffused with a bright crimson.

'You can in no way enlighten us?' pointedly said the Emperor.

'In no way, sire.'

The Emperor remained silent for a moment. He was evidently considering.

'In that case,' he said at last, 'let God's hand alone guide us. Which of you, gentlemen, is the richest?'

'It is I,' said Gretzky, without his words being re-echoed in this instance.

'You bear the title of Count, do you not?' asked the Emperor, and without waiting for the answer, he went on: 'You have made a very sorry use of both your title and your wealth, but, seeing that you have both, you will marry this young girl.'

Valerian shook from head to foot. He had not expected that kind of punishment.

'You will marry her not later than to-day in the chapel of the regiment; your estates and property are confiscated for the benefit of your wife—as well as yours, gentlemen, in favour of the same. After the nuptial ceremony you will start for Siberia. That is the way in which in my reign I will endeavour to teach people to respect the honour of young girls.'

Raïssa, according to the old Russian custom, bent almost to the ground; her father stood at the salute.

'You are an old soldier, I perceive,' said the Emperor to Porof.

'Retired army surgeon, your Majesty,' came the answer.

'Very well; you see that I administer justice without distinction of persons. I wish you every happiness, mademoiselle,' he said to Raïssa. Then, turning to the Countess, who stood by despondent and silent, 'You may think, perhaps, Countess, that your kind action has been ill rewarded; but remember that our real rewards are not of this world. We cannot but feel greater esteem and affection for you.'

He was about to salute the small group, when a second thought seemed to strike him.

'In consideration of your mutual devotion, gentlemen, you shall not be deprived of either your caste or your rank.'

Then he went out.

CHAPTER XVI.

STUPEFACTION was written on every face. No one had foreseen this verdict, unprecedented, startling beyond belief. The confiscation of their property was regarded as the most natural thing in the world—the culprits had fully expected that the punishment would take that shape—but the idea of vindicating Raïssa's honour by a marriage had never entered their minds.

That marriage, to be followed immediately by lifelong separation, was, however, the most rational solution one could imagine. It gave the victim the rank and fortune for which, certainly, she had not bargained, but which, nevertheless, were due to her. Would the verdict have been the same if Raïssa had been ugly and commonplace? No one could have said with certainty. So judgment upon the point would have been madness.

When the Emperor had left the room, Rézof came up to Raïssa.

'Well done, mademoiselle,' he said with a sneer. 'Allow me to congratulate you.'

Raïssa looked him full in the face. If she had been certain that this man, who was frivolous and satirical rather than downright bad, had been the one that committed the outrage, she would have flung at him an insult the recollection of which lasts through life. Odious as was the outrage, she would have felt it to be

more odious still if it had come from him. But she was not certain. 'If it were he?' she repeated to herself, thinking of Gretzky. The hand of God, invoked by the Emperor, gave him to her as a husband. Who knew if the decision was not the outcome of Divine Justice?

Gretzky, mute and scowling, was thinking to himself that if the decision were merely the result of accident, accident had been strangely just. He felt reluctant to believe that Raïssa had not seen his features—not recognised the sound of his voice. He suspected a cleverly-concocted revenge, and went almost as far as to suspect his aunt of having furthered the combination. Just then everything, absolutely everything, except the reality, seemed to him possible. How could this man have understood the confusion that took possession of Raïssa's soul and mind at the moment of the crime?

'You have no longer any need of me, mademoiselle,' said the Countess to her *protégée*. 'Farewell.'

'Ah, madame,' exclaimed the young girl, 'forgive me! God is my witness that I would not cause you grief or harm.'

'I do not blame you,' said the Countess, averting her face. 'It is not you who committed the crime; but besides the guilty ones, there are others attainted by the same blow. May you be happy.'

And without attempting to atone for this somewhat cruel speech, she departed.

Raïssa, left alone with her father in presence of the three men, did not know what to do. Fortunately, a lady-in-waiting of the Empress came to fetch her. The Sovereign had expressed a wish to see her.

The condemned men were allowed to go home in order to prepare for their departure, but they had a guard to

accompany them. When about to separate, Sabakine, who had hitherto been silent, opened his lips:

'Who would have thought that this scrape would take us to Siberia?' he said.

'Siberia is not a bourne from whence no traveller returns,' jeered Rézof, misquoting Shakespeare. 'Fortunately, there are Imperial marriages, christenings, and coronations, with their amnesties. It is Gretzky who is hit the hardest. He will be married in a few hours. And verily we know not what a day may bring forth. For had anyone prophesied this yesterday about the same time I should have called him all kinds of uncomplimentary names. In another few hours you will be a Benedict, old fellow. I wish you joy, for your wife is very pretty.'

'Go to the devil,' replied Gretzky, in a surly tone. 'I don't know what you think, but it seems to me that this is scarcely a matter for chaff.'

'That is where we differ. It's God's judgment, comrade mine. This will teach you not to lay sacrilegious hands on pretty young girls. If it had been I who had done this deed——'

'If it had been you, I suppose you would not have let me get married?'

'I don't know, old fellow. Siberia is bad enough, but marriage is worse.'

'What does it matter,' growled Sabakine, 'seeing that he will never meet her again?'

'That is a compensation, I admit,' said Rézof. 'My sister won't like it, I am sure.'

'Nor my mother,' added Sabakine.

'That'll do,' concluded Rézof. 'Have I not told you that there are Imperial marriages, birthdays, and so forth? Before two years are gone over our heads we'll

be back. You do not for a moment imagine that the Emperor will let three jolly good fellows like ourselves fret our lives out there?'

'We'll come back, but ruined.'

'Very well, we'll live on our pay. Five-and-twenty roubles a month. We won't be able to go to the Red Tavern, but our friends and relations will help us. I'll bet you that we'll be richer than the richest among us. There is something in friendship, my boys.'

'You are making my head whirl, with all your talk,' said Gretzky. 'We'll have lots of time to discuss matters in Siberia. Go and pack your trunks.'

CHAPTER XVII.

When Princess Adine heard of the blow that had befallen her brother, she vented her anger in words eminently calculated to make her share the latter's journey to Siberia if someone had taken the trouble to repeat them. Rézof having pointed this out to her, a reaction set in, and she fell sobbing on his neck.

'Listen,' said Rézof, very much upset himself. 'There is no time to cry and to lament. The best thing you can do is to assist me to make life tolerable out yonder.'

'And with what, I wonder?'

'You know my property is confiscated. The handsome Countess Gretzky——'

'Which one?'

'The new Countess, or the Countess that will be this evening.'

Adine could not repress a movement of disgust.

'Yes, the very one. Very well, it is she who'll administer my property; she or trustees, but the result

will be identically the same. I'll not get a penny. Give me some money.'

'Do you want much?'

'All you have got. I do not suppose it can matter much to you,' said Rézof, somewhat offended.

'Not at all; but you know that as far as I am concerned, all my resources consist of debts. Still, here is what I have got.'

She opened a small writing-desk, took a tiny pocket-book from it, and emptied its contents on the table.

'All this?' said Rézof, counting the notes. 'Three hundred and twenty-five roubles. Is that all you possess?'

'Alas, yes, and that is not even mine, for I owe it to my dressmaker, who is coming for it to-morrow. You know that I never have any money. It runs through my fingers.'

The Princess opened the five fingers of her beautiful hand the better to express the way the money went.

Rézof, sorry for his outburst of temper, was weighing the situation with a doleful mien, when his brother-in-law, the Court Chamberlain, entered the room. Seeing the notes on the table, he at once understood the difficulty, and placed himself at Rézof's disposal. The latter did not think it necessary to stand upon ceremony.

Meanwhile, Gretzky had received a visit from his aunt. The Countess did not waste time in needless reproaches. He, on the other hand, did not care to discuss the part she had taken in the affair. The hand of Fate was to them plainly visible in it. The superstition which among the most civilized Sclavs never wholly disappears made them bear the blow with a kind of resignation.

The Countess handed her nephew all the money she had been able to collect at so short a notice. Valerian him-

self had a pretty good sum at home. The Imperial verdict bore only upon his property—*i.e.*, on the future income yielded by his estates—so he was not bound to leave these present resources behind him.

'Aunt,' said the young man, 'a last request. Write to my sister what has happened. I haven't the courage to tell her such bad news. Helen is as sensible as I am the reverse. How many times has not she predicted that my escapades would cost me dear one day? She did not think, however, that her prophecy would be realized with such a vengeance.'

The Countess remained silent. Madame Marsof, *née* Gretzky, had never been a favourite of hers. She was often reproached with having no heart. In reality the reproach was undeserved, but Helen Marsof did nothing to gainsay it. The very reasonableness of her judgments seemed hard; the wisdom of her advice seemed so much egotism, and still no one had ever had a just cause of complaint against her. She was a good and charitable woman, but she lacked the grace to win people's hearts.

'I will write to her,' said the Countess at last. 'I'll be obliged to do so, seeing that no one would undertake the task. And this—this young person: what is she going to do?'

'My wife,' said the young officer bitterly. 'Much good may all this do her. She'll do what she likes. It's no longer any business of mine.'

The Countess sat musing.

'Valerian,' she said softly, after a few moments, 'you should remember that it is no fault of hers. She has suffered cruelly.'

'Well, I am going to suffer cruelly; each one in his turn. Will you continue to see her, aunt?'

'How can you ask such a question? Never!'

An expression of anger satisfied overspread Gretzky's features.

'Aunt,' he said, 'one more favour. Be kind enough to be at my side to-night. I have no mother; my sister is far from here. It is not an occasion of joy to our house, but one of mourning, and when adversity comes we should stand by one another.'

'Be it so,' replied the Countess. 'I will come to the chapel. You are going away immediately afterwards.'

Valerian nodded his head.

'My poor boy! so young and ruined—exiled!'

'Rézof says that people come back from there,' said the young man, trying to console his aunt.

The Countess shrugged her shoulders.

'He is the kind of man that would come back from anywhere. He is likely to float, where others go to the bottom.'

'Not in this instance,' said the young man, laughing. 'He and his protectors have got themselves into a hole.'

'Serves him right. If the Princess's tongue had not been wagging, if she had not endeavoured to interfere, the thing would have run its usual course, and you would not have been so severely punished.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

By the Emperor's orders the chapel of the regiment had been brilliantly illuminated, because the Sovereign was determined that the redemption of the crime should be invested with all possible solemnity. A magnificent carpet covered the floor from the entrance of the chapel to the lectern arranged for the reading of the Gospels; the sconces on the walls, the chandeliers suspended from

the ceiling, held large lighted wax tapers; the whole of the staff of the regiment in review uniform awaited the arrival of the bride and bridegroom.

A lady-in-waiting represented the Empress, a general, aide-de-camp, represented the Emperor; every detail of the ceremony had been carefully and minutely settled beforehand; without could be heard the jingling of the horses' bells in the barrack-yard—the horses that were to carry the three officers to their first stage on the road to exile. One might have fancied himself to be taking part in a wedding of the highest aristocracy.

Rézof and Sabakine were their comrade's best men. The former's sister had come out of sheer curiosity. Sabakine's mother had accompanied her son in order to spend a few additional moments with him. Gretzky was escorted by his aunt and a lady-in-waiting, who, according to the custom usual in Russia, represented his godmother.

The choir intoned the first verse of the marriage service, 'Behold the bridegroom cometh full of glory' . . . and Valerian, pale as death, with shame and suppressed rage, took his stand a few steps in advance of his comrades.

When the last notes had died away there was a deep silence, only broken now and then by the whispers of those within, and the faint sound of conversation from without. For the chapel was crowded, and those who had been unable to gain admission were patiently waiting on the chance of catching a glimpse of what they chose to call 'the interesting young woman.'

For the present every eye was turned towards the tall form of Gretzky, but all at once there was a stir among the crowd. The choristers' voices rang once more upon the air, a side door opened, and Raïssa appeared.

She was led forward by a general, aide-de-camp to the

Emperor. The officer was in full uniform, his breast glittering with various orders. Raïssa advanced slowly, her head bent low upon her breast. She wore a dress of white cashmere, the only material her recent bereavement allowed her to wear under the circumstances, the only costume she could wear for a marriage, even if she had been a widow. A long veil covered her from head to foot, but instead of a wreath of orange blossoms, her magnificent tresses were crowned with white roses. The whole of the dress was that of a widow contracting a second marriage—*plus* the veil—and in keeping with the situation, for Raïssa was neither wife nor widow, and she could not lay claim to the other title. So thought the Empress, by whose orders the costume had been adopted.

She stepped slowly along, reluctantly, as it were. The justice for which she had ardently wished seemed hard to bear now that she had obtained it. She felt that if among this crowd there were some that pitied her, there were many more that hated her. She felt that this sudden elevation, unprecedented, would bring her many more enemies than friends. She felt, above all, that to her husband she was an object of disgust and aversion.

'Great Heavens!' she thought, 'how he must hate me if he be not the man. The horror with which I must inspire him!'

By this time she had reached the lectern, and Gretzky stepped forward. The General placed Raïssa's hand in that of the young officer, and the ceremony commenced.

The fumes of the incense slowly curled upward, the sacred chants fell upon the heavily-laden air, and those two beings, one of whom, at any rate, ardently wished for the death of the other, stood side by side, about to be united in indissoluble bonds. No wonder that the priest,

acquainted with the particulars of the case, hesitated to address them.

Fortunately he was a man of sense, so he spoke to them neither of the joys of married life, nor of the happiness awaiting them. He spoke of redemption and penance, of humble resignation to God's will, of duty austerely accomplished; and many a woman who knew nothing of Raïssa except the misfortune that had befallen her and the reward meted out to her, wept in silence, thinking that her life also had been one of duty and resignation.

'Wilt thou take this woman to be thy wife?' asked the priest of Gretzky.

'Yes,' he said, choking with anger.

'Wilt thou take this man to be thy husband?' he continued, turning to Raïssa.

'I will;' came the almost inaudible reply, for Raïssa's face, crimson with shame, was dropping on her breast.

Then they brought the consecrated wine in the tiny golden cup. The husband dipped his lips into it, and his wife after him. This part of the ceremony, the symbol of close and eternal union, was repeated thrice; after which there was the exchange of rings. In another moment the acolytes held out the golden wedding crowns to Rézof and Sabakine, who in their turn held them suspended above the heads of the bride and bridegroom as the latter, guided by the priest, and their hands joined in the end of his stole, walked three times round the lectern, while the choir invoked the blessing of the Highest upon them.

The spectators themselves drew a long breath; the ceremony was virtually at an end, and the husband and wife stood motionless before the priest.

Then, solemnly, and ringing like a clarion upon the air,

came a sentence that made them tremble like the wind-tossed poplar.

'Kiss one another,' said the priest.

For the first time the man and woman looked one another in the face; the woman almost recoiled beneath the contemptuous look of the man. The priest was obliged to repeat his command, and to add in a whisper:

'In Heaven's name, be careful not to cause a scandal!'

Gretzky's commanding head inclined slowly towards his wife's.

'In Heaven's name,' the priest had said. Heaven only knew the aversion, the rage condensed in that kiss, when Gretzky's scornful lips brushed those of Raïssa.

'If it were he,' said the wife to herself, turning as cold as ice with humiliation and grief. 'Shall I ever know? How can I know?'

The spectators drew nigh, and in silence greeted the married couple. No effusive hand-shaking, no kissing, no congratulations, well-meant or otherwise. Even Countess Gretzky's charity was at fault. She coldly bowed to her niece, who bent almost to the ground. Porof had caught the arm of his daughter, ready to defend her against an aggression which he almost appeared to expect. Nothing of the kind happened. In his turn Gretzky bowed to his wife, thanked the priest, turned his back on his father-in-law, and, followed by all the officers, their friends and relations, made his way to an adjacent door. It was the apartment where the condemned had to change their uniform for their travelling dress.

Raïssa and her father suddenly found themselves alone in the chapel. One by one the tapers were extinguished; darkness was slowly gathering around them. Even the few soldiers' wives who had remained to the last to have

a look at Raïssa, were gone. The young wife shivered from head to foot.

'Father,' she wailed, 'this is worse than death.'

The old man proudly raised his head.

'Our honour is safe,' he said.

A footman belonging to the court came to them.

'The Countess's carriage is waiting,' he said to Raïssa.

The latter stared at him in surprise; then all of a sudden she recollected.

'Countess,' she said, turning to her father; 'it is true I am a countess. It is a fortune and a title, to obtain which I have caused three men to be sent to Siberia. It is horrible!'

'Please to wait,' she said to the footman; 'I am not quite ready. Stay,' she added; 'tell Count Gretzky that I wish to speak to him. You will find him in the other room.' Then to her father, who looked at her as one dazed: 'It is absolutely necessary that I should speak to him. I beseech you, father, leave me alone for a few moments with this man. I must, and will know. Do not refuse me this.'

Porof felt by no means convinced of the expediency of this step so suddenly decided upon; but his daughter's face, in spite of her imploring accents, showed such determination as to warn him that opposition would be useless. So when she took him by the hand and led him to the threshold of the chapel, he submitted in silence.

Raïssa came back towards the altar. The great wall enclosing it, and which was thickly overlaid with gold between the sacred images—the wall separated her from the Holy of Holies, which no Russian woman may enter. A few lamps burned dimly before the worm-eaten and motionless saints; there was a faint, weird glimmer of

the gilded angles; at the back before the altar two tapers, votive offerings of the newly-married couple, flickered fitfully, and but partly illumined the space in front of the rails.

A side door was thrown open, and Raïssa beheld her husband coming towards her. He had already donned his travelling-dress; his fur cap was in his hand. Never had 'handsome' Gretzky been handsomer than he was at that moment, but never had his features looked so hard and relentless.

'What do you wish with me?' he said to Raïssa, whose legs were giving way under her, and who was obliged to lean against the railings of the choir.

'I wish to speak to you, monsieur. I cannot allow you to go like this.'

'It is by the Czar's orders,' replied Gretzky, in a tone that chilled Raïssa to the marrow.

'The Czar has bestowed a name and rank upon me which I did not ask. I did not wish——'

'You did not wish to be revenged upon us? Then why did you cry so loudly for vengeance?'

'I did not wish to harm you,' sighed Raïssa, utter despair getting the mastery of her, for she felt a strange emotion well up in her heart. Assuredly she would not have harmed this young man—her husband. She would without compunction have killed Rézof if she had had the power; Sabakine only inspired her with aversion; but this one—she felt that she would have gladly forgiven him. But she was not sure that it was he.

'The blow that strikes you is a cruel one,' she said, 'and it is perhaps an unjust one.'

'We cannot discuss the orders of the highest authority in the land,' replied Valerian, with a sardonic smile. 'Besides, you should be the last to complain of them.'

'Nevertheless, monsieur,' objected Raïssa, gathering courage; 'if it is not you that are most guilty, it is at any rate you who are most severely punished.'

A bitter, ferocious smile played upon Gretzky's lips.

'We are all three equally guilty,' he said.

'You know well enough that you are not!' exclaimed Raïssa in despair. 'You know well enough that reparation to me is only due from one of you. Is it not needlessly cruel to withhold his name from me? As from you to me, monsieur, do not you think that I am sufficiently humiliated, without leaving me in ignorance whether I have the right to look you in the face, or to——'

She hid her face, pale as death, in her hands, and heavily reeled against the rails.

It was then that the idea of a cheap but signal vengeance crossed Gretzky's mind. He caught at it eagerly.

'What does it matter to you?' he sneered. 'You have attained your wish—a name and wealth. That ought to be sufficient.'

At this new outrage Raïssa drew herself up to her full height.

'Yes,' she said, 'I wanted a name; but the name which was due to me, no other. If the justice of the Sovereign has made a mistake, tell me so, monsieur. I wish to know it; nay, I have the right to know it.'

'Bid them who have so well assisted you in your vengeance tell it you. As for me, I give you warning that you will never know it, if I can help it. Have done with this comedy, madame, you know but too well what you pretend not to know.'

'As Heaven is my witness, I swear to you that I do not know it!' exclaimed Raïssa, placing her hand on the image of our Lord, which stood close to her.

Gretzky looked at her with a look of incredulity. She

was magnificently handsome at that moment; anger, anguish, and the strange feeling that caused her to look upon Gretzky as other than an enemy, all these combined, imparted to her features and bearing something almost supernatural.

In spite of himself, the young officer's mind went back to the scene of the Red Tavern. He seemed to hear once more the heartrending cries of Raïssa; her supplications, her sobs, her desperate struggle in the dark.

'She may, after all, not know that it is I,' he said to himself. A feeling of pity entered his soul; he was about to speak, when the jingle of bells from the barrack-yard fell upon his ear. The kibitka that was to take him and his comrades to Siberia was being led up to the door. His vindictive instinct got the better of him.

'You do not know who is the man,' he said. 'Well, so much the better; that will be the punishment for the harm you have done us. Farewell, madame, and may happiness attend you.'

He strode away quickly, hissing out the last sentence with a diabolical laugh.

Raïssa looked after him until the door had closed, then she dropped on her knees before the image of our Lord, whom she had invoked.

'May Heaven have pity on us both!' she said aloud; then, in a whisper, 'Thou knowest how I would have loved him, if it had been he.'

The jingling of bells, the confused sound of voices and leave-taking, drew the young woman from her meditations. Her father, uneasy at her prolonged absence, came into the chapel.

'They are going,' he said.

Raïssa ran into the adjacent room, and rushed to the

window. With bare heads, beneath the snow that began to fall in large flakes, the condemned men received the priest's blessing.

The three young men sentenced to an indefinite exile aroused profound pity. Their men, who were much attached to them, were ranged in the barrack-yard; the torches they carried threw a lurid light on the scene that had become suddenly still, and which was only broken by the violent sobs of Madame Sabakine, carried off senseless at the last moment. Princess Adine embraced her brother with more fortitude. As for Gretzky, he bowed low to receive his aunt's last kiss on his forehead, then got into the sleigh without looking behind him. The kibitka, surrounded by the gendarmes, began to move slowly on the still untrodden snow. At the same time a piercing cry was heard from within, and with a dull thud Raïssa fell to the floor.

CHAPTER XIX.

When Porof saw his daughter stretched apparently lifeless before him, he felt little or no alarm, but bent quickly over her and unfastened the collar of her dress, then as quickly went to the footman waiting outside. 'Fetch me some water,' he said; 'my daughter has fainted.' His prevision turned out to be correct, because before the attendant had returned Raïssa had opened her eyes again and risen from her prostrate position. She merely dipped her lips into the cup held out to her, moistened her forehead, and with imperturbable coolness prepared to depart. She did not even wince when, on reaching the top of the flight of steps, she heard the footman shout, 'Countess Gretzky's carriage.' With the utmost com-

posure she stepped into the pretty brougham, drawn by two magnificent steppers. When she and her father were seated, and before the man could ask a question, she gave him the address of her own humble home. Porof said nothing, but it was evident by his looks that she had forestalled his thoughts in that respect.

The carriage quickly drove off in the direction opposite to that taken by the three officers. When it stopped at Raïssa's home the coachman asked for orders.

'Go back to your master's, and manage as usual,' came the answer. Then she added, 'I will tell you to-morrow.'

The carriage disappeared, drawn by two of the three horses that had carried her to the Red Tavern.

When the young wife crossed the threshold of her modest dwelling, her two old servants stood ready to welcome her with their gratulations. She smiled sadly both at them and at the change that had come over her own life since that morning. It was the only thing she had not foreseen, and she was asking herself whether, if she could have foreseen it, she would not have foregone her revenge rather than suffer as she had suffered that day. And she felt that her sufferings were not at an end, that this was but the beginning; for, do what she would, she could not banish from her mind the image of Gretzky at that one moment of that cruel interview, when pity for her anguish seemed to overspread his face.

She spent a sleepless night, and was up betimes. Her mind was still in a whirl; ideas came crowding thick and fast upon it, and when, after much worrying, she managed to dispose of one, she put it aside as it were, and passed to the next. But there were too many, and she herself felt that their orderly arrangement must be a work of time. First of all she assumed once more her mourning dress, and, accompanied by her father, went to her

mother's grave. 'God's acre' was not very far; they went on foot.

It had snowed heavily during the night; the roads were of a dazzling white, for the few sledges passing along this outlying quarter, deserted at the best of times, had scarcely left a trace on the foamy-looking mass. From the door of their cottage to the gates of the cemetery, surmounted by a black iron cross, Raïssa and her father did not meet with a soul. And when once within, they followed the solitary paths they had so often trodden together since the mother's death without saying a word to, nay, without looking at, one another. Their minds were too full for words. In his 'mind's eye' Porof beheld once more the funeral car that had carried away his faithful and courageous wife, after thirty years of mutual affection and trust; and in the sombre grief of feeling himself alone, the satisfaction of the signal vengeance he had obtained wholly disappeared.

Raïssa, on the other hand, thought less of the grief at having lost her mother than of the joy the latter would have felt could she have seen the reparation obtained by her daughter. And, in spite of herself, an emotion, painful but sweet at the same time, took possession of her at the recollection of the ceremony of the previous evening; a poignant anguish overmastered her as, in imagination, she beheld the picture of the road to Siberia, as it conjured up the kibitka of the exiled men. In vain did she try to shake off the vision by reproaching herself for giving less thought to her dead mother than to this man, her husband and her enemy.

By this time they had reached Madame Porof's grave, upon the decoration of which the old army surgeon had spent the whole of his small savings. A block of marble, the sharp outlines of which betrayed its recent acquisi-

tion, supported a small iron cross, a statuette of the Virgin in white porcelain was let into the stone, and beneath it the name of the departed gleamed in golden letters, above the text, 'Blessed are those who suffer, for they shall be comforted.' The strain produced by his ideas of vengeance had dictated the verse to Porof. Subsequent events had realized his hopes, perhaps; it was very doubtful whether these events had brought much comfort to Raïssa.

As she hung the wreath of white roses she had worn on the previous evening on the cross, she did not appear to think so. According to her, this strange symbol of her miscarried destiny belonged by rights to her mother.

'Neither wife nor mother,' said Raïssa almost aloud. 'The sorrows and trials of a wedded life will be mine, its joys will never be.' Then a sad smile played upon her lips at the thought of her husband, his friends, and their relations. 'They no doubt think of me as revelling in my revenge. Ah me! I feel as unhappy as I did before—nay, if aught, more wretched than before—this loathsome union,' she said.

The words elicited no remark from her father. He had not even heard them. He stood as one deeply lost in thought, and in their walk homeward Raïssa could not help noticing his altered mien and carriage. Four-and-twenty hours only appeared to have worked an alarming change; for though during the interview with Countess Gretzky on the previous day her father had seemed to her aged and tottering, he had evidently recovered his energy and his usual firmness afterwards. But now that his task was, as it were, accomplished, he bent beneath the burden of a double grief, of a crushing responsibility. His listless air, his painful and dragging steps, told more eloquently than words could have done that henceforth

he considered himself as having done with this world, that all mundane things weighed heavily both on his soul and on his shoulders.

The young wife felt confronted by the prospect of utter solitude in a few months, perhaps before then, when no one would comfort her for the loss of her father, and once more her thoughts went out to the exiled husband. One bitter tear coursed down her cheek, and fell within the folds of her black dress.

When they reached home they beheld with great surprise the small sitting-room filled with flowers and friends. The news of Raïssa's unexpected rise in the world, and maybe of its accompanying wealth also, had brought to the erstwhile deserted house all those who, since the funeral, had deliberately shunned it. Curiosity had done the rest. The most distant relatives as well as the most casual acquaintances of the sorely tried family came to get particulars of the events, of the use to which Raïssa's fortune would be put. Others had sent flowers, and many more, unable to come themselves, had sent their gratulations through their servants.

These marks of attention were but coldly received by Raïssa. They followed too close upon the most marked indifference, not to say disdain, to admit of their sincerity. She herself seemed to set so little store by her change of position that the visitors retired wondering at the woman who 'so skilfully knew how to hide her game.'

Taking advantage of a moment's respite in the ebb and flow of callers, the father and daughter, henceforth inseparable, took up their cloaks once more, and went out, in order to escape from renewed importunities. They went straight to Valerian Gretzky's house. The Emperor's orders, transmitted to the servants, had struck deep terror into this little world, so unenlightened.

They were under the impression that Raïssa had obtained the right of life and death over them and her reception was as that of a queen by her most slavish subjects.

The house throughout had been thoroughly set in order. The horses, admirably groomed, were awaiting her inspection in the stables; the carriages in the coach-houses had been equally prepared to that effect. With throbbing heart Raïssa ascended the crimson-carpeted staircase, and entered the dwelling of her husband.

'How rich he is!' said Porof, with almost childish astonishment.

Raïssa felt glad he had not said, 'How rich we are!' and rewarded her father with an ineffable look of filial affection.

Porof was right—Valerian Gretzky was very rich indeed. From the entrance-hall, with its oaken wainscoting and settles, its tapestried panelling, to the dressing-room, with its white marble slab and quaintly-fashioned old silver ewer and basin, everything attested the sumptuous habits of the grand old family, to whom wealth was a matter of course; habits manifested by the perfect taste of every object employed rather than by the number of remarkable objects. Everything was unobtrusively handsome; the softness of the silken hangings, the massive furniture, the antique-looking mirrors—everything showed that the owner was very rich, and, what was better still, spent his riches with good taste.

An old steward, whose parents, born on the country estate, had served the Gretzkys from time immemorial, preceded the new proprietors with downcast air. His dearest affections had been wounded by the exile of his master; he would have given his heart's blood to be able to accompany him. But Valerian could take no one

with him, seeing that he did not know how to provide for his attendants under such circumstances.

When the two got to the threshold of Valerian's bedroom, the old retainer threw open the double-doors, for of all the rooms that one only had remained closed. Then he stood aside to let Raïssa pass. But the new Countess Gretzky stopped, and hesitated; it seemed to her unbecoming to enter the bedroom of a man, and she felt the blood tingling through her body from head to foot.

'Well,' exclaimed her father, who, whatever his feelings of delicacy, could not guess at that one. She went in timidly and embarrassed.

Here again the magnificent furniture showed refined taste; but, according to Russian custom, the bedstead—narrow and low, a real camp bedstead—had but one mattress; the sheets of linen, almost as fine as gossamer, turned down on a single blanket, seemed to await the return of the master who had not returned.

'It's the master himself who killed that bear,' said the old steward, pointing to the splendid skin of a black bear spread before the bed.

No one spoke. Emboldened by the unpretentious look of Porof and the simple dignity of Raïssa, the old man added:

'You are going to live here, madame. Will you please give me your orders about the dinner?'

'No,' replied the young woman hurriedly; 'no, we are not going to live here. Are we, father?'

'No,' said Porof, energetically shaking his head.

The steward looked at them with surprise.

'In that case madame will give her orders to take an apartment elsewhere?'

'No,' said Raïssa; 'we will remain where we are.'

The old retainer looked more astonished than ever.

'As your Excellency pleases,' he said, with a sigh. 'The master was very fond of this apartment.'

Raïssa ran her eye over the familiar objects, outward signs of Gretzky's habits and tastes. Some books—very few—several beautiful seascapes, family miniatures. A number of nicknacks were arranged on the writing-table, gifts of friends, no doubt—of a beloved mistress, perhaps.

'Whose portrait is this?' she asked, pointing to a miniature. It was that of a young woman—handsome indeed, but with a listless and cold look.

'It's the Count's sister,' answered the old man; 'your sister-in-law.'

Raïssa thought that this would scarcely be a pleasant sister-in-law to get along with, and her eyes wandered to a second picture, framed in blue velvet and suspended over the bedstead.

'And that one?' she asked.

'Heavens!' said the old man, in a tone of vexation, 'this is our dear departed mistress, the Count's mother, your mother-in-law, madame. The master wanted to take it with him. In his hurry he must have forgotten it.'

'It must be sent to him,' said Raïssa excitedly.

'You are the mistress here,' sighed the old servant, almost reproachfully; 'everything is yours; we have no right to touch anything.'

The young wife looked at the steward; then she stood considering for a moment. She seemed to have taken a sudden resolve.

'Have you the Count's address?'

'Certainly, madame.'

'Go and fetch me a case—a big one.'

The old man disappeared. Porof had seated himself on a small couch; his hands were lying on his knees,

there was a look of weariness on his face; he stared at his daughter without attempting to utter a single word. Everything on his part appeared henceforth to require an effort.

The old steward soon returned with a small portmanteau.

'This is too small,' said Raïssa.

In another moment he was back with a trunk of moderate size.

With feverish excitement Raïssa set to packing the various nicknacks, such as the candlesticks, inkstand, blotting-book—everything that might bring some happy recollection to Valerian's mind. She folded the tablecloth and laid it above the other things, then took down the miniatures, which she wrapped in napkins. In the wardrobe, which she had meanwhile opened, she found piles of fine and delicately-scented underlinen. Almost at haphazard she caught up dozens of handkerchiefs, and silken shirts, etc. She only stopped in her labours when the trunk was full. At the top of the whole she carefully put the miniatures.

'The Count set great store by the portrait of his mother,' ventured the old retainer, who was watching almost heart-broken what he inwardly designated as an act of pillage.

'Well,' remarked Raïssa, turning her face, flushed with exertion, to him, 'seeing that you know the Count's address, you will despatch this trunk to him this very day.'

The old servitor's face expressed many things at these unexpected words; joy and surprise had, however, the upper hand.

'It shall be done at once, madame,' he quavered, 'at once. He will be very pleased.

Raïssa bent her blushing face low over the lid of the trunk which she was locking at that moment. When she had turned the key she handed it to the old man.

'What is your name?' she asked.

'Fadéi, your Excellency.'

'Very well, Fadéi, you'll report to me about everything that is going on here. Matters will remain as in the Count's time, so that at his return he will find everything in order.'

'Then you think that he will come back?' quoth the old man, looking at the new Countess through his tear-bedimmed eyes.

'I hope so,' murmured Raïssa, as if speaking in a dream.

Fadéi looked at her once more. It would be difficult to say what the old man read in her face, but he drew close to her, caught her hand, and respectfully kissed it.

Raïssa started, as if disturbed in her sleep.

'You will bring your report every week,' she said. 'And now I'm going.'

She cast a glance at her father; he had fallen asleep on the couch, his head thrown back, his features pale as death, and in the waning daylight he looked like a spectre.

'Shall I order the carriage for madame?' asked the old man eagerly.

'No,' replied Raïssa, 'a cab will do.'

Very surprised, but by no means displeased, Fadéi did as he was told. Raïssa gently awakened her father, and lovingly supported his tottering steps down the crimson-carpeted staircase. When they reached home they put Porof to bed. A resistless inclination to fall asleep had come over him, an inclination which henceforth he was unable to shake off.

CHAPTER XX.

GREAT was the surprise when people were told that 'this little girl,' as the world persisted in calling her—'this little girl,' raised to the nobility and fortune as if by a miracle, refused to dwell in her own house, and went on vegetating in her lowly home.

'There is nothing so very surprising in it,' quoth Princess Adine; 'leeches do not care to live out of their own element—mud.'

This uncharitable remark was addressed to the successor of General Kline. The erstwhile Minister of Police had retired to his country estate to meditate on the grandeur and fall of Ministers of Police who prefer the part of carpet-knights to that of skilled and conscientious detectives. How often during those sad meditations did his imagination conjure up the splendid marble-white arms, the sculptural figure of the 'divine Adine'! Fate had, however, willed it that the Princess, as far as he was concerned, should remain to him a star—that is to say, inaccessible.

'After all,' he growled a score of times a day—'after all, it's to her I owe my disgrace. She assuredly might have conveyed to me a few words of sympathy.'

Those lamentations proved but too well that General Kline, however eminent as a carpet-knight, lacked the mundane philosophy, and even the most elementary perspicacity, so necessary to the continued enjoyment of such eminence. For to have fancied for one instant that Adine would concern herself about a man fallen in disgrace, Kline must have had two scales before his eyes of the consistency of unpolished tortoiseshell. Kline having dropped out of this story, we take our leave of him once for all.

One of the first things Adine did after her brother's departure was to call upon the woman whom the decree of exile had struck at the same time with herself. Her visit to Madame Sabakine was a short one, though even longer than she intended it to be. Adine had timed it so as to find the lady 'not at home.' Unfortunately for her calculations, some unforeseen though slight ailment kept Madame Sabakine within, and the Princess, inwardly railing at her bad luck, sent in her name, instead of merely leaving her card. After half-a-dozen crocodile tears, conscientiously gathered in the finest of lace handkerchiefs, followed by an imprecation against Raïssa, worded in most elegant terms, and a bitter criticism against the insolence of the nobodies who dared to attack the nobility, the whole wound up by a scrap of Christian consolation, mixed with much more Christian-like deference for the dictates of sovereign authority. Princess Adine got up, shook her dress as a bird shakes its ruffled feathers, and took leave of Madame Sabakine.

When the door of her carriage had closed upon her, Adine wiped her lips with her handkerchief. 'What a bore those lachrymose people are,' she said, almost aloud. In Countess Gretzky Adine found a different woman to tackle. Valerian's aunt shed no tears. That was so much gained, but she would not allow Rézof's sister to attack Raïssa, to the profound astonishment of the former.

'Surely, dear Countess, you do not mean to defend this girl?'

'There is no need to defend her,' replied Madame Gretzky calmly; 'she only did her duty.'

'Her duty, in having my brother exiled, and this poor Sabakine also—a little bit of an unlicked bear, Sabakine,

but such a good fellow after all—and last, but by no means least, your nephew. Was that her duty?'

'Her duty was to protest against an undeserved outrage, as she has done. She did not put herself in the way of it.'

'That is not proved,' objected Adine, piqued.

'It is proved as far as I am concerned,' retorted the Countess without raising her voice, but in so firm a tone as to make the measure of her offence against the Princess full.

'Of course, everything depends upon the point of view we take of it,' said the latter in an off-hand way. 'As for me, I think that if such a misfortune had occurred to me, I should have had but one thought—to hide myself from the looks of everyone.'

'When the heart is pure, and when one is conscious of one's own innocence, one dreads scandal less than injustice,' said the Countess.

Adine took the hint. The Countess was too well acquainted with her little peccadilloes to engage in a controversy with her. Under the pretext that it was getting late she got up and adjusted her lace shawl.

'I suppose this amiable young person will visit you?' she asked, as a parting shot.

'Never,' replied the Countess. 'Though innocent, she has been the cause of a great misfortune to us. I respect and pity her, for her life will not be a happy one; but there is nothing in common between me and her.'

'I did not know,' hummed the Princess. 'In that case, *au revoir*, dear Countess.'

The tone in which the latter sentence was uttered indicated that if the Countess had received the visits of Raïssa she would have been deprived of those of the

Princess. The old gentlewoman did not appear to be inordinately frightened at the contingency.

'Farewell,' she said to her visitor, seeing her as far as the hall.

Adine went home hatching dire vengeance against the whole of the Gretzky family, but having been told that her lapdog had had a fit of indigestion during her absence, she forgot all about her plot, and sent for the Court veterinary.

CHAPTER XXI.

TENDERLY nursed by his daughter, Porof faded away slowly. From her early girlhood Raïssa had been taught the elementary treatment of accidents and of slight ailments. Her father had pretty well told her all he knew in that respect. He considered it highly useful for a woman to know how to treat her own ailments in conjunction with the doctor, or without him in the event of his being too far away.

An old colleague of Porof, a friend of long standing, came to see him every day, repeated the prescription of the previous one, shook his head, respectfully kissed the hand of Raïssa, whom he had ushered into the world, and went away sadly.

'Had not we better have a consultation?' Raïssa had asked, at which question the old doctor had spread out his arms, and shrugged his shoulders. 'What's the good?' he had said; 'life is ebbing away.'

The doctor was right, life was ebbing away. Porof was dying, without suffering any pain. His memory was already gone, he asked few questions and did not complain. In his lucid moments he merely lay looking at his daughter with an ineffable look of tenderness and anxiety.

At such times Raïssa drew a chair to the bedstead and smiled at him, as she was wont to smile when everyone in the humble home was happy and contented.

One day when she was smiling like this at him, trying to cheer him by talking of the coming spring and of the nice walks they would take, Porof, who had been listening, his eyes intently watching his daughter, placed his emaciated forefinger on Raïssa's black dress.

'You will have to wear mourning a long while, daughter mine,' he said. 'It is sad at your age. Don't wear it for me; I should not like it.'

In vain did his daughter try to divert his thoughts from the subject, the old man had dropped off again into his habitual doze.

He only went out once more, towards the latter end of March. A clerk from Raïssa's trustees came to hand her the proceeds of the estates of two out of the three exiled officers, of Sabakine's and Rézof's. Raïssa merely told the clerk to place the bundles of bank-notes on the table, and gave him a receipt for the whole. When she was alone once more with her father, the latter began to finger the notes, and appeared to be turning over something in his mind. At last he spoke.

'You must send everything, daughter; this money is not ours, is it?'

'Don't worry yourself, dear father,' said Raïssa, 'I am aware of it.'

'That is right; write at once, do not delay a moment.'

His bony, shaking hand pointed to the small writing-table. Raïssa did as she was told. She took two sheets of note-paper, wrote at the top of each the name of the officer for whom it was intended, copied the accounts the clerk had left to her, and added the respective amounts. But when about to seal the envelopes, she stopped. As-

suredly she was bound to indicate whence the despatches came. She sat quite still for a few moments, her father all the while watching the changed expression on her face. His hand, which was still pointed to the paper, struck two smart raps on the table, which had been placed within his reach. He wanted to attract Raïssa's attention, and for the last few months he had employed that kind of telegraphic language to aid his own faltering accents.

'How am I to sign?' asked Raïssa of herself, rather than of her father, whose weakened intellect was henceforth of little assistance to her.

'Sign your name, Raïssa Gretzky,' said the old man decisively. The young woman looked at her father with surprise, then her pen quickly traced on each sheet the still unfamiliar signature.

'Raïssa Gretzky,' she said slowly; 'this is the first time I sign the name.'

'It will bring you luck; you have done your duty,' said the old man, holding out his hand to his daughter, who kissed it reverently.

The two letters were despatched that very day, to Porof's undisguised satisfaction. The effort to guide his daughter's path in that respect appeared to have exhausted the remainder of his vital strength. He lived but a few days longer. One evening, towards six o'clock, as the last yellow rays of the waning sun were slowly filtering through the blinds, he said to his daughter in a scarcely audible voice:

'Is there any money left?'

'Yes,' replied Raïssa, 'but not much, the remains of your pension; there is just enough to last till the end of the month.'

'After the first,' said Porof, his voice getting weaker,

'after the first, when my pension has been paid, you'll have a mass said for your mother. It is a long while since we have been to the cemetery.'

Raïssa laid his head in her arms, gently stroked his face, and whispered some words of comfort to him. He seemed to breathe more heavily, she listened intently, becoming somewhat frightened, he still breathed, then all was still—still as death. She bent over him and looked into his eyes—and then she knew that she stood alone in this world; she was an orphan indeed.

CHAPTER XXII.

GREAT was the astonishment of the neighbourhood at Porof's simple funeral. 'She must be a miser,' people said, alluding to Raïssa. These busybodies had endeavoured to calculate the annual income of the new countess. According to them it was something fabulous, and seeing that Raïssa's expenditure was less difficult to check, they had come to that charitable conclusion.

The real facts of the case were these: When, after the funeral, which she had accompanied on foot, in a heavy thaw, Raïssa returned home, the cook welcomed her with a 'Madame, you have forgotten to order dinner.'

Raïssa felt listlessly in her pocket, and produced from it a very flat, limp purse. It contained a single note of ten roubles.

'Make it go as far as you can,' she said to the servant, 'for it is all I have got in the world.'

'The Lor l have mercy upon us!' exclaimed the woman. 'What will you do, madame?'

Raïssa waved her hand with that peculiar Russian movement which means, 'What does it matter?' Then she added with a wan smile:

'People do not die of hunger.'

On the evening of that melancholy day Fadéi came to see her. The old and faithful retainer felt towards the mistress whom fate had so unexpectedly given him a kind of respect not unmixed with a touch of affection. To all others this woman was the enemy of his master; to him, since the episode of the despatch of the trunk, she was his master's friend.

Fadéi was not only a Russian, but a family servant to the backbone. On the one hand he only saw his master, on the other he believed in fate. Added to this, he was sincerely and deeply religious.

'They may talk as they like,' he said one day, in the kitchen at Valerian's house, 'they may talk as they like, I feel convinced that the Lord has brought this misfortune upon our master to stop him in his downward course. He went too fast, his life was not that of a Christian. It is God and the Archangel Michael who have stopped him on his road to perdition.'

'Of course he is repenting in Siberia,' said the cook ironically; for he was furious at having no longer any fine dinners to cook. He would have forgiven any and everything to Raïssa if she had only given dinner-parties, but he objected to have his glory hid under a bushel; besides, this glory had brought him some capital perquisites in former days. What extras could he make out of the porridge and cabbage soup consumed in the servants' hall?

Fadéi merely shook his head, as one convinced of what he says. 'I know what I mean,' he said, in a prophetic tone. 'I tell you the master is suffering for his sins, but the hand of God is protecting him, no doubt. Without that, I tell you that he would have been worse off.'

Hence when he stood before his mistress, it was

with the air of a man who is resigned to the will of God.

'The Lord has afflicted your Excellency,' he said, bending lowly before her. 'May He vouchsafe eternal rest to the soul of your late father.'

'I thank you,' replied Raïssa mechanically. 'Is everything going on all right with you?' she added, after a few moments.

'All is well, madame, the Lord be praised. I have come to take your orders with regard to mourning. Perhaps you might wish the servants to assume mourning?'

'No,' said Raïssa, 'the Count's servants must not wear mourning for the retired army surgeon, Peter Porof. Still I thank you for having thought of it.'

Fadéi's respect for this young woman, who understood her position so well, and who knew still better how to maintain it, increased of a sudden.

'I have also come to tell your Excellency that the Count's steward has written to apprise me of a remittance. There has been a sale of corn at Komarino.'

'Komarino?' repeated Raïssa.

'Yes, the Count's principal estate; and it is there that he spent his summer holidays. It is a very handsome place, with a splendid, lordly mansion, all built in stone; there are beautiful gardens and a river.' Fadéi suddenly stopped and waited respectfully, but seeing that Raïssa made no comment, he went on. 'The stock of fodder is gone. We have no wood, and the servants' wages have not been paid since the master went away.'

'Very well,' said Raïssa. 'I'll look to it. Has the steward stated the amount he is going to send?'

'About twenty-three thousand roubles, your Excellency.'

Raïssa's thoughts went back to her mother, who had

died of grief, to her father, who had died of sheer weariness of life. Then she beheld herself, her wasted and solitary existence, and she said to herself that all this money was nothing compared to what she had lost.

'There is a great deal to look after at the house, Excellency,' continued Fadéi, after having given a slight cough to somewhat hide his embarrassment at not being encouraged. 'There is a great deal to be seen to. There are the horses eating their heads off, seeing that they are of no use to you. Perhaps it would be well to send them to Komarino, where they would cost nothing to keep. And then there are the servants also, they might be sent there too, because at St. Petersburg they are only being spoilt. They cost money and do nothing to earn it.'

'I'll come to-morrow,' said Raïssa, in a tone that had suddenly become very serious. She felt that the weight of a new responsibility had fallen upon her shoulders so weary already. She felt that she was not justified in leaving the estate of which she considered herself only the trustee, to careless and unskilful hands.

'At what time are we to expect your Excellency at home?' asked Fadéi, almost reverently.

'At home.' Raïssa started at the words, and felt strangely troubled. In fact, she was going to her home, but such a home, the home also of the man who loathed her. But she did not return loathing for loathing. Everything connected with Valerian inspired the young woman with a feeling of chaste, of reverent worship almost, of the worship given to something beyond one's reach, to something forbidden. She blushed at the mention of her home, at the sight of her servants, as she had blushed before him, as she would have blushed still, and she was almost angry with herself for not knowing why.

'At three o'clock,' she said.

'Will your Excellency dine at home?' said the old retainer.

'No, no,' murmured Raïssa. The words almost sounded like sacrilege to her. 'No, no,' she repeated, 'I will only come for a few moments.'

'Shall I send the carriage?' asked Fadéi, as he stood on the threshold with his hand on the door. 'The horses are out of condition with doing nothing. It will do them good.'

Raïssa hesitated, then the same 'sweet anguish' came over her. 'Send the carriage about three,' she said.

Fadéi went away, and Raïssa returned to the room where her father had died.

'Am I doing right, am I doing wrong?' she said to herself, still profoundly troubled. 'Have you no counsel to give me, my dear counsellors of whom death has deprived me? Am I for ever to remain a stranger to this world that repulses me; am I to lift my head as an innocent woman; am I to hide it as a guilty one? I am not guilty, as thou knowest, O Lord. Why then should I fear the light of day, why then should I fly from the reparation I have sought?'

The still voice of Raïssa's heart murmured: 'If I but knew whether it is he!' And her former anguish returned in full upon her, but more lacerating, more painful than before. He could have cleared up her doubts, he could have made that anguish cease, had he willed it, he whom she had sent to Siberia. He might have sent her to a convent for the rest of her life with one word. It would have been sufficient for him to say, 'It is not I,' or he could have restored her peace of mind, reinstated her in her own eyes and in those of others by revealing the name of her ravisher. He had willed it otherwise, he had in-

sisted upon having revenge in his turn. His wife was to be tortured to the very last by the horrible doubt that prevented her from looking her husband in the face.

Yes, Valerian was cruel, and still Raïssa felt that she was almost forgiving him his cruelty. As her imagination conjured up the man as she had last seen him, this imagination also supplied other pictures of which he was the centre figure, bright and happy pictures . . . when, all of a sudden, she shook from head to foot, reproaching herself with thinking less of her dead parents, one of whom at least was scarcely cold in his grave, than of those who were so guilty towards her. And with choking sobs she fell on her knees and prayed, prayed long and fervently, until the tears coursed down her cheeks. Then she felt relieved.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NEXT day towards three o'clock the neighbourhood was thrown into a state of excitement, or at any rate into a state of feeling as closely resembling the former as the sparse number of its inhabitants would admit, by the arrival of the magnificent carriage drawn by two splendid black steppers that belonged to Raïssa, but of which she had never made any use except on the occasion of her marriage, and then much against her will.

The young wife took her seat unaccompanied, and in a short time reached her husband's home. In accordance with the wish of his mistress, the old servant had been careful not to assemble the servants in order to fitly receive her. He, with the hall-porter, watched for Raïssa's coming, and it was he who took off the simple black cloth cloak that enwrapped her like a pall.

Without casting a glance, as she had done the first time, at the sumptuous apartment, Raïssa made straight for the kind of snuggery designated as the Count's study. Snuggery it was not, for the room was a spacious one, hung and furnished with dark green, with window and door curtains of the same sombre hue, which admitted little or no daylight. Fadéi, who had followed close on her heels, pushed forward the chair placed before the writing-table, then handed her a tiny key.

'In the right-hand drawer,' he said, 'your Excellency will find the money that came this morning, addressed to me as usual. The steward thought it would do as well, seeing that you gave orders not to change aught in the management of the house and the estate.'

The old man was trying to read in his mistress's face the signs of approval or blame. Seeing nothing he went on. 'There is also the general report with regard to the estate. Madame will perhaps think it advisable to go and see for herself. Madame will see,' he concluded.

Raïssa slowly opened the drawer, the bundle of notes that had come in the morning was lying before her. In spite of herself her thoughts reverted to the ten-rouble note, all she possessed in the world, which she had given to her cook yesterday, and the last penny of which had probably been spent by now. What a contrast, indeed, between this wealth and her poverty.

Everything that lay there was hers by the sovereign's will. How many indulgences and enjoyments, how much luxury of every kind did that money represent, to say nothing of the princely mansion itself with its furniture and plate, its horses and carriages. Raïssa shut the drawer with a snap. The vision of all these things, without exciting her, had deeply troubled her. 'How much is due to you?' she said to Fadéi.

The latter began some endless accounts, which the young wife took particular care to immediately jot down, for the whole of the old servant's arithmetic and book-keeping was done from memory, and Raïssa would have been exceedingly puzzled to imitate the system. They managed, nevertheless, at the end of two hours to reduce the chaos to order. So much for the horses' fodder, so much for the wages and keep of the servants, so much for the interest of a loan contracted by the Count in an hour of ill-luck at the card-table. Once more the bank-notes were allowed to see the light of day. This time they were divided and arranged in sealed envelopes, stating their destination.

'Is that all?' said Raïssa at last, with a deep sigh, partly of fatigue, partly of relief.

'That is all, madame,' replied the old man, with a look of admiration at so capital a manager.

Again Raïssa took up the remainder of the bank-notes she had put back in the drawer. There was still something like fifteen thousand roubles left.

Fadéi was still looking at her, respectfully, but with a painful expression on his wrinkled face. He was thinking of the exiled master—of the young master whom he had tended, nursed, dandled in his arms, grumbled at, watched in his hours of sickness, and watched for in his hours of health while he was enjoying himself far into the small hours of morning.

The Count must have long ago spent all the money he took with him. Delicacies and comforts cost dear while travelling, especially when, in order to obtain them, one is obliged to share them with gendarmes and escorts. Yes, yes, Valerian must be very poor out yonder, in the wretched cabin that had to stand him instead of his sumptuous apartments; he must be very wretched without

books, without dogs, without horses, and perhaps without cigars.

Nevertheless, Fadéi dared not speak; everything he saw before him was Raïssa's. Was it not sufficient already that she had been good enough to settle the accounts, to pay the debts, to feed a parcel of servants for whom she had no use? Those poor folk, born on the estate of the Count whom they could not leave, whom they could ask for nothing, might have been left to starve had she so willed it. Instead of which she took care of them, as well as of everything belonging to her husband. Could they reasonably expect anything more of her?

Fadéi heaved a deep sigh and imperceptibly made a sign of the Cross on his breast, while looking at the sacred image standing on a bracket in a corner of the room. The brief prayer appeared to have inspired him with courage; he coughed lightly, in order, as it were, to announce a speech. Raïssa had drifted into dream-land again, but now she looked up and put her hand into the drawer. Fadéi, whose courage sank into his shoes at once, felt that he had let the opportunity slip.

Raïssa took out the bank-notes for the fourth time, and placed them on the table. She counted as far as twelve thousand roubles, and made them into a small parcel, which she set apart; then counted the remainder and put them into a small pocket-book which she had found in the drawer.

'At what time does the post close?' she asked.

'At three o'clock, your Excellency,' answered Fadéi.

'Then it is too late to-day,' observed Raïssa. Daylight was waning fast, it became difficult to distinguish things. She took up a pen and wrote on a large envelope, 'To His Excellency Count Valerian Gretzky.'

'Where is he?' she said, turning to the old man.

Fadéi slowly enunciated the address, which she wrote in a bold hand.

'Bring me a candle,' she said, without looking up.

In a minute the candle stood before her, the sealing-wax lay ready to hand; a seal engraved with the Gretzky arms was in the pen-tray. Raïssa took the twelve thousand roubles, placed them in the envelope, sealed it carefully, and placed it by the side of the old man, who stood fairly dazzled.

'You'll send this to Count Gretzky the first thing in the morning,' she said.

Fadéi looked at her without being able to believe his eyes; then two big tears coursed down his wrinkled cheeks.

'Well,' she said, 'did not you understand?' She quietly raised her eyes, and on the old retainer's features she read something that caused her own to flush with pleasure and confusion.

Fadéi had finished thinking; his idea had taken shape in his mind. Thrice in succession he, as it were, prostrated himself before Raïssa. It was the old Russian custom, which he observed in its minutest details, by imprinting a reverent kiss on her hand.

'God has sent you to us,' he said, while the tears continued to gather in his eyes, but he paid no attention to them. 'God has sent you to us,' he repeated; 'and the ways of God are inscrutable. May the blessing of the Lord be upon you, because you have clothed those who were cold, and given drink to those who were athirst.'

This emphatic language did not strike Raïssa as exaggerated, it did not make her smile. She herself was very nigh shedding tears.

'Go, go, my good Fadéi; I wish to be left to myself for a moment.'

The old man took up the precious envelope.

'Write your name at the back, madame,' he said; 'it is you who are sending the money.'

'No, no,' said Raïssa; 'it is you.'

Fadéi bowed low, and went out.

When left to herself, Raïssa went deliberately to a small sofa, which, from its cosy position in a corner, must have been the favourite resting-place of its owner. And when she kneeled before it, and placed her head on its cushions, she smelt a pungent odour of very good tobacco, and some English perfume mingled. Yes, it was here that Valerian had spent some of his happiest hours when he was at home.

For some moments she chewed the cud, as it were, of the joy her good action had brought her; then her tortures of doubt overmastered her once more, and amidst choking tears she gasped: 'Cruel and ungrateful, why did you not tell me the truth? why did you not tell me the truth?'

CHAPTER XXIV.

After that Raïssa returned frequently to her husband's house. These visits savoured of forbidden fruit, as it were. She felt soothed—often intoxicated, by allowing her mind to dwell on Gretzky. She in turn blushed and grew pale as she whispered his name to herself.

In those secret pilgrimages she confided to her husband's household gods the doubts that tortured her. A subtle something of the exiled husband had been left behind in the dwelling formerly occupied by him; his image seemed to haunt the darkest corners of the dwelling. Raïssa felt a delicious joy—a delicious anguish at arranging and rearranging the objects that had belonged to him, at

turning over his books, at drawing out Fadéi about his master's habits and tastes. As a matter of course, the old retainer became more and more attached to this mistress, so silent and so dignified—to this mistress who only seemed to have the welfare of the house at heart, who anxiously inquired about the needs of even the most lowly among the servants.

The young wife had brought to the management of the house—formerly so neglected—the care and habits of saving so natural to those endowed with few worldly goods.

The servants were carefully superintended, the superfluous expenses ruthlessly cut down. Many of the former were despatched to the estate; in short, Gretzky's income, instead of being half wasted in useless show, bade fair to become double in the course of time. Fadéi felt and knew all this, and loved the prudent administratrix of his master's wealth. During one of her visits Raïssa made up her mind to turn out the drawer, the key of which had been handed to her by the old servant. Right at the bottom, in an inlaid box, she came upon a thick bundle of letters. Her first impulse was to read them, the second to throw them on the fire—for they were a woman's letters. The third, more sensible than the other two, was to look at the date and the signature.

The fourth of these epistles went back as far as eight months ago. The signature was that of 'Helen Marsof.' Raïssa remembered that this was the name of her sister-in-law, whose estate was near that of Valerian. Fadéi had now and then spoken to her of Madame Marsof with great respect, but without enthusiasm, like one who has nothing good to say, and who will not say evil.

This reticence did not fail to strike Raïssa, and she made up her mind to get at the bottom of the mystery

which she suspected. Up till now, however, she had learnt nothing. At present she had the opportunity of knowing the truth about the woman whom Fate had given her for a sister-in-law. She asked herself whether she was to let it escape. The young woman hesitated for a moment, then, at haphazard, she took a letter from the bundle, intending to burn it with the rest if it should turn out to be unfavourable to her whom she wished to know. She read, and sat struck with astonishment.

Madame Marsof had lost her husband two years and a half before, under circumstances so mysterious as to inspire those who knew her with stupefaction.

Madame Marsof vaguely felt that a suspicion was hanging over her of being concerned in her husband's death, and she was evidently unable to prove the contrary.

'You know,' she wrote, 'how attached I was to my husband, what a deep affection I continued to bear him, notwithstanding our dissensions. You know how I suffered from his neglect and his unfaithfulness, and I ask you to stand by me—to protect me against all this slander. For, after all, it is your duty to defend me, as it is mine to keep silent, while defying the world. It is not the business of the slandered to defend themselves; it remains for those who have the right to obtain justice for them to make every effort in order to clear the innocent.'

Valerian did not appear to have made many efforts to that effect, for the letters grew gradually cooler. The last note, a very short one, and evidently written in a hurry and in a feverish hand, only contained these words:

'You do not come—you are unmistakably determined not to come. Your presence here might have saved me, perhaps; your absence is a proof of your belief in my

guilt. I will not lower myself in an attempt to justify myself. One day you will regret having believed in appearances rather than in your sister's words. On that day may God forgive you; I also may forgive you, perhaps, but only then when you shall have admitted your error and your unjust behaviour.'

Raïssa remained pensive, and only noticed her indiscretion when too late.

'It was very wrong of me to have done what I did,' she thought to herself; 'still, after all, this does not seem to be a very great secret, seeing that Madame Marsof complains of having been slandered by those who ought to have protected her.'

She put the letters back into the drawer and called Fadéi. The latter came at once. He was never far away when 'the young countess,' as he called her, paid a visit to the mansion.

'You have never spoken to me of my sister-in-law. You have scarcely mentioned her name. What sort of woman is she?'

The old man made a deprecatory gesture.

'She is a good woman,' he said hesitatingly; 'she is our master's sister.'

'I know that. Is she a widow?'

'She is a widow,' answered Fadéi, looking down.

'Has she any children?'

'She has a boy of seven.'

'How did her husband die?'

'He died—he died—God called him.'

'After an illness?' insisted Raïssa.

'I do not know. I was not there,' muttered Fadéi. 'I have been in St. Petersburg these last ten years; I know nothing of what happened out there.'

Raïssa perceived plainly that she would get no in-

formation in that quarter, and sent the old man away. When he got as far as the door he stopped.

'Will you not go into the country, madame?' he said. 'The fine weather is coming, and the steward out there is not first-rate. You, who know so well how to manage a house, madame—you would do a great deal of good to the estate if you went there.'

The young wife looked at the servant, who was evidently fidgety and uneasy.

'Have you had bad news?' she asked.

'Bad news, no. It is Madame Marsof who has written to me—she has only written a few lines to me,' he added, emphasizing the 'me.' 'She says that this state of things cannot go on much longer. Since the master's exile everything is going wrong.'

A new idea struck Raïssa.

'Then, according to you, we had better go at once?' she said.

'Yes; and the sooner the better.'

Raïssa reflected for a moment.

'Very well,' she said at last. 'We'll start next week. You'll tell the servants that they are all going with me. We'll live in the country.'

Surprised and delighted at this sudden decision, Fadéi looked at his young mistress. He perceived that she had fully made up her mind, for she smiled at him.

'Decidedly,' thought Fadéi as he went, 'it is God who sent her to us.'

Raïssa's arrangements for her departure did not take long. Her old cook was to go with her as housekeeper, a situation was found for the other servant; the furniture, the silent witnesses of so much joy and sorrow, was stored. Nevertheless, it was not without a tug at her heartstrings that the young wife bade good-bye to the

little wooden tenement. To her, all this worn mahogany, the faded hangings, were so many confidants of her young life's dreams, of her hopes and fears. But the dreams lay shattered deep down a pass she dared not sound. Her former existence was only a confused mist; other cares, other hopes had taken the place of filial affection and anxiety. For, however strange the marriage she had contracted might be, she felt that she ought to devote herself heart and soul to the obligations it had imposed upon her. Perhaps the strangest feature of all this was that instead of being a burden, these obligations were a source of profound, albeit secret, joy to her. These joys would have been greater still had not the bitter doubt as to the identity of her seducer interposed itself between her and them. 'If I could but be sure that it was he!' That exclamation was never long absent from her lips.

On the day before her departure, Raïssa paid a last visit to her husband's mansion. The Holland wraps, like spectres, covered couches, chairs, chandeliers. The looking-glasses were wrapped around also; the hangings, carefully besprinkled with camphor, had been stowed away in large boxes, the joints of which, for greater security against moth, had been religiously pasted over with paper. The very window-panes had been thickly coated with whiting, so that they admitted but a dim and uncertain light. Everything had the bare and melancholy look which characterizes the homes abandoned by the family during the summer. Raïssa, in spite of herself, reflected that this minute order, casting a chill, was not unlike the life in store for her; dim, cold, and barren.

'No, not barren,' she said, 'seeing that I shall be able to do a great deal of good.' Then another thought slowly entered her heart. 'Valerian appears to be on indifferent terms with his sister; if I could effect a reconciliation!'

'A mad dream, the dream of one casting about for a straw,' she said to herself, while inspecting for the last time every nook and corner of the mansion.

Nevertheless, in her inmost heart, it seemed impossible to her for her husband not to be grateful, if such a reconciliation could be effected.

When her inspection was at an end Raïssa made up her mind to ask a question of Fadéi which had been on the tip of her tongue for days.

'Has the Count received the case you despatched to him?' she said, blushing, and without daring to lift her eyes to the old man's face.

Fadéi took time to answer, and then he seemed to speak unwillingly.

'Yes, madame.'

Raïssa did not ask whether Valerian had added a word of thanks to her in his letter of acknowledgment. The question seemed a useless one, for Fadéi would have mentioned it had he done so. Still she could not help asking:

'Was he pleased?'

'He was indeed, madame,' said Fadéi; this time very eagerly. 'He was very pleased indeed, and he has said that those keepsakes will make him less unhappy than he would have been without them.'

Raïssa gave a deep sigh.

'One word from him,' she said to herself, 'and I should have been by his side. He would not have felt so lonely then. And the money,' she said aloud, 'did the Count get that?'

'He must have got it by now, madame, but we have no answer as yet.'

'That is all right, then,' said the young woman, and went away.

She left a card at Countess Gretzky's, taking care, however, not to inquire whether the Countess was at home.

She sent Fadéi to inquire whether the Countess had any messages for her nephew or for her niece, or for anyone in the neighbourhood whither she was going.

'I have no message to send,' said the Countess to Fadéi. Then, after a moment's silence, she added. 'Fadéi, what think you of this young woman?'

'I think, madame,' replied the old man warmly, 'I think that God orders everything for the best. This woman will turn out to be the salvation of our house.'

'Amen, with all my heart,' said the Countess, reverently, but with a sigh.

Next morning Raïssa, accompanied by her servant and by Fadéi, left St. Petersburg for Komarino. The train that took them passed along a sombre, thickly-wooded plantation, close to the outskirts. It was the cemetery where her parents lay.

'Farewell,' sighed the young woman, wiping away her fast-falling tears; 'farewell to you, my beloved on earth, I am travelling towards the unknown.'

CHAPTER XXV.

On the very day that Raïssa left St. Petersburg for the country, Gretzky received the money sent to him by Raïssa. Fadéi had told the story exactly as it had happened with all the simplicity of one to whom literature was a thing unknown. His master could not suspect him of having invented the details accompanying his narrative; hence the idea of restoring to him almost

the whole of the wealth taken from him by imperial decree belonged exclusively to Raïssa.

Gretzky would have liked to get rid of that thought, which hurt him to the quick. He could not, and would not, admit any obligation to his wife, his worst enemy. In spite of the sophistry which comes so easily when one likes, having endeavoured to persuade himself that, in acting as she did, Raïssa was only doing her duty, he was bound to admit that she owed him nothing, and that this remittance was an act of pure generosity. And it was this admission that made him surly.

Night had set in when his two companions in exile came bustling into the log hut that had been assigned to Gretzky, and which was similar to theirs.

A lamp burned brightly on the rough deal table. The table was hidden beneath the cloth sent by Raïssa. A small, bevelled glass, the size of a sheet of notepaper, adorned the wall. The glass, framed in silver, was also a gift of Raïssa.

In fact, half-a-hundred costly nicknacks proved the anxiety of the detested wife to embellish the home of the exiled husband. This contrast between past joys and present grief contributed perhaps to Valerian's sadness; but he too easily failed to remember that this comparative material comfort was due to Raïssa's solicitude.

'Well, moping again,' said Rézof, seating himself on a horsehair sofa, all the springs of which were gone, and whose stuffing protruded on all sides. 'Moping again. You are really difficult to please. It is very nice here. There is a scent of St. Petersburg about the place,' added the hare-brained officer, sniffing the air.

Gretzky simply gave a grunt, but did not answer.

'What's the good of moping? You had news from

St. Petersburg to-day. I saw the postman going into your hut?' asked Rézof.

'Yes,' said Gretzky laconically.

'Well, is it good or bad news?'

'Good rather than bad.'

'Did you get any money?'

'Yes.'

'Look at the sneak. We shall have to drag it from him. How much?'

'Twelve thousand roubles.'

The two friends held up their hands in astonishment. 'Twelve thousand roubles! Who sent you that fortune?'

'My man,' said Gretzky, after a moment's hesitation.

'Where the devil did he get them from? Has your aunt sold some of her property?'

'No,' said Gretzky.

'In that case . . . it is your wife, perhaps!' exclaimed Sabakine, who had hitherto been silent.

Gretzky looked angrily at him. Then he answered: 'It is she. Well, what then?'

'What then? Nothing at all. Your wife is simply sublime, that's all!'

'I beg of you, don't let us joke about these things,' growled Gretzky.

'I am not joking at all, I am very serious indeed,' remarked Sabakine. 'When, six weeks ago, we got the money she sent us, you know well enough that we were almost as astonished as pleased, above all astonished that she had kept nothing for her own wants.'

'It is merely a restitution, nothing more,' interrupted Gretzky.

'Granted that it is a restitution and nothing more; but I defy you to find throughout the world a dozen women that would have made that restitution. As for myself, I

frankly confess that, with the exception of my mother, I do not know a single one.'

'Nor do I,' added Rézof; 'not a single one.'

'Oh you, you have a sister.'

'That's just why I say, "Not a single one." Look here, old fellow, this is what my loving and soft-hearted sister writes to me in answer to a request for money I sent to her a week before Madame Gretzky's came.'

Gretzky frowned at hearing Raïssa spoken of as Madame Gretzky; but Rézof took no notice, and produced from his pocket a long letter written on pink paper, ornamented with a monogram in silver. '"My dear brother,"' he read in French, a comic expression stealing over his features—'"My dear brother, your letter has given me great pain, for it is very painful to be told of the grief of those whom we love without being able to alleviate it."'

'That's what I call style,' exclaimed Rézof, interrupting himself, and holding the epistle at arm's length, the better to express his admiration of the same. 'That's what I call style,' he repeated. 'Her French master charged twenty francs a lesson, but my parents and their precious Adine had their money's worth.' Then he continued: '"I should be only too glad to send you what you ask me, but I am absolutely heartbroken at the thought that it is utterly impossible."' He stopped once more. 'At any rate, she does not beat about the bush, and her logic is convincing if somewhat selfish. "I was obliged to have a new dress for the last court ball,"' he went on, '"a love of a dress, trimmed with beautiful lace from top to bottom; and it has cost my very eyes out of my head. Truly, it made a great sensation. The Emperor spoke to me twice. You may fancy how pleased I was to think that your exile has in no way

affected my standing . . . " Dear, good soul, so generous of her,' growled the reader, then took up the epistle once more. '"I hope to profit by this goodwill, and take steps to obtain your pardon, but we must do nothing in a hurry." Thank you for nothing,' he commented. '"I haven't got a penny I can call my own,"' he went on, '"and my husband refuses to pay my debts. He pretends that I have overstepped the bounds of reason, which of course is simply absurd on his part. We are not on the best of terms just now, so I do not advise you to apply to him for me. If you did you would expose me to a refusal in case I should ask him for myself; and some of my creditors lead me such a life, that I fear I shall have to apply to my husband in order to appease them, notwithstanding the annoyance it would cause me. You must, therefore, excuse me, dear brother, and continue to believe in the unchanging affection of your devoted sister, ADINE."'

'That's a magnificent specimen of a letter,' exclaimed Sabakine, bursting out laughing.

'I haven't done yet,' said Rézof; 'there is a *post-scriptum*, which, with your permission, I will read to you. "Tell your friends that we have sadly missed them this winter. After all, we find that no one can lead off a mazurka like Gretzky. Tell them also that I wish them every happiness."'

'Much obliged,' growled Gretzky. 'It is not difficult to see that she is the handsomest woman at Court,' he went on in another moment, somewhat less surlily. 'She has been spoilt.'

'I don't think there was much to spoil,' commented Rézof. 'Well, my boy,' he said, 'where should I have been but for your wife sending me the proceeds of my estate?'

He only got a shrug of the shoulders in reply.

'You are unjust,' began Sabakine.

'I am married,' interrupted Gretzky.

'But, after all,' exclaimed Rézof, 'if you are married it's only justice, seeing that it was you——'

When Rézof exclaimed 'Seeing that it was you,' Gretzky stared at him for a moment.

'I know all about that,' he said, pushing aside his chair, and beginning to pace up and down, which with him was the sign of great inward agitation. 'If it had not been just, I should have simply blown my brains out. But it is none the more amusing for being just.'

His two friends remained silent while he continued his perambulations.

'It's just, if you like,' he said, becoming more excited. 'I have no doubt got what I deserve, by being sent to Siberia, and deprived of my property, for having got drunk in your company, for having met with a bit of a girl in the street, and for having taken her to the Red Tavern. Nay, more. I have to thank the august clemency out yonder for having left me my rank and title. But is it just that by the greatest of accidents this bit of a girl, out by herself at nightfall, instead of being a lady's-maid who has made havoc of a dozen or two footmen's peace of mind, happens to be an honest girl, and her father a retired army surgeon? Don't be a couple of asses; and tell me whether everyone of us nas not had a score of similar adventures without such a confounded ending to them?'

'Not like that one,' objected Sabakine. 'There was seduction, perhaps, but there was no violence.'

Gretzky buried his hands in his pockets, and did not answer at once.

'It was by common agreement that we did this thing,' he said at last.

'And, as a matter of course, we accompanied you hither,' replied Rézof.

They were silent again. Gretzky still kept pacing up and down the hut.

'Do you wish to know my opinion,' said Sabakine. 'We are three idiots—or madmen, if you like, but you, in addition, are as proud as Lucifer. What vexes your pride is not to have been ruined—to have been exiled—but to be married.'

'Yes, it does vex my pride,' burst out Gretzky, standing quite still and planting his feet firmly on the ground in front of Sabakine. 'Yes, it does vex my pride, that I, Count Valerian Gretzky, young, rich, of an old family, should have had this nobody, this plebeian—for she is little more—foisted upon me; that I, Count Gretzky, should be married and condemned to die without posterity—at any rate, without legitimate posterity. And after that you want me to take this thing as a matter of course, bow my head, to say humbly and in a contrite voice, "I have deserved all this. I ask pardon of my wife for having taken her for a mere slut." No, no, I will not do that.'

Saying which Valerian resumed his strides across the cabin.

'Now listen to what I have got to say,' replied Sabakine, 'and remember that my meditations upon the subject are by no means more cheerful than yours. You have treated her like the slut you thought her to be, and she turned out to be an honest girl. You thought her to be moved by greed; that she was not so moved, she has proved already. You thought her spiteful and vindictive; she simply felt herself insulted. And the proofs

that she is not ill-natured,' he wound up, pointing to the objects sent by Raïssa, 'you have them before you.'

At these words Gretzky flung himself, as it were, on a small shelf full of pretty nicknacks that had been sent from St. Petersburg, literally tore it from the wall against which it was fixed, threw it on the floor, and stamped with both feet upon it. After which he looked at Sabakine, his eyes flashing with anger. Sabakine sat perfectly unmoved.

'You may destroy the material proofs,' he said, without raising his voice, 'you will not succeed in destroying the kind feeling that prompted the act of sending them. Your wife is a noble woman. She is handsome, and worthy of respect. You have not chosen her; but you may accept her without shame. If I were you, I know very well what I should do?'

'You would ask her pardon?' said Gretzky with a terrible sneer.

'That is exactly what I should do, and, what is more, I should ask her to share my exile. Her refusal would condemn her. If she accepted——'

'You'd live happy ever afterwards, and have many children,' supplied Gretzky with the same sneer.

'You have said it,' quietly concluded Sabakine.

'I would do the same,' chimed in Rézof; 'first of all, to have a woman here to make our tea and to look to our food would be happiness indeed.'

'I regret being unable to afford you this happiness,' said Gretzky, still keeping up his ironical tone; 'but honestly and truly I do not feel myself equal to such a sacrifice.'

'Time works wonders,' replied Sabakine, 'and you may become more amenable to reason.'

'Never,' said Gretzky, this time more calmly, but nevertheless very firmly.

'You'll change your mind,' repeated Sabakine.

'Never,' repeated Gretzky.

'I am sorry, for your sake,' said Sabakine coldly. 'It is getting late, Rézof; are you coming?'

The two friends left the cabin. Gretzky, morose and taciturn, scarcely replied to their good-night. For some moments after they had gone he stood as if nailed to the floor; then he flung himself on his bed and burst into tears. They brought no relief, for they were tears of anger.

While he was cursing her, Raïssa was sitting at the open window of the railway-carriage, inhaling the sweet air of spring wafted to her by the buds and trees. For the time being she had left off thinking of her parents; her mind was far away with the exile in Siberia.

'If it were he,' she murmured, 'I would forgive him with all my heart. How I should love him—if he would only speak.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

MADAME MARSOF was supposed to be one of the largest landed proprietors in the 'government' where her estates were situated. In those days estates were estimated according to the number of souls they contained, and Madame Marsof possessed at least five thousand serfs. Of course there were more princely fortunes than hers, but few were so admirably managed, especially during M. Marsof's lifetime.

M. Marsof had been a pleasant man, a delightful companion, though not of very steady habits. The back-biting element of the provinces pretended that this latter

failing was mostly due to his having been brought up by a Frenchman, but the assertion was pure slander, seeing that M. Marsof's father, who was Russian to the backbone, had enjoyed, and not without foundation, a reputation similar to his son's.

Nicholas Marsof, then, was a most agreeable and amiable gentleman, exceedingly fond of everything that makes life pleasant—women, wine, gaming, society, amateur theatricals. In the latter he shone especially, inventing parts for some, dresses for others, organizing orchestras, etc. He was both impresario, stage-manager, prompter, actor, and everything else that was required for the success of the entertainment. But once these important functions were at an end, he became the lazy, listless landed proprietor, smoking good cigars all day long, and falling asleep over his newspaper. To make him shake off this state of somnolence, it wanted nothing less than a new junketing, a ball at the 'Assembly of the Nobility' in the county town, a charity concert, or another amateur performance.

It would be idle to deny that Madame Marsof did not suffer from the striking contrast between her 'husband at home' and her 'husband out.' Countess Helen Oretzky had been madly smitten with 'handsome Marsof,' as he was called, and had married him in a frame of mind bordering on ecstasy which absolutely transfigured her for the time being. People had said that during their courtship she was not only in the clouds, but marched upon the stars. After a twelvemonth of wedded life, Helen Marsof had become aware of the stars —if stars there had been—having been manufactured out of tinsel, and that her heaven had been nothing more than a spheroid made of blue cardboard, like a bit of pantomime property. In other words, Marsof was

charming, but there was nothing in common between him and the stars, save operatic stars, perhaps, when some of these happened to be passing through the county town.

For some time Helen could only look at the shattered fragments of her happiness, flung at her feet ever and anon, and as often gathered up by her in order to glue them together, but the means employed to that effect were too weak. She looked in Marsof for what he did not possess, for what in the first transports of love she had credited him with—namely, a love of the ideal, a capability for great devotion, for heroic sacrifice. Unfortunately, Marsof possessed nothing of all this; but, on the other hand, he was the ringleader of every sport and jollification throughout the province.

He was somewhat bored at seeing his wife's indifference to everything that interested him, and began to look for attractions away from home. Tittle-tattle said that these attractions were numerous, and of all shades, from the jet black to the golden fair, including the Venetian red. But gossip was not so unanimous in attributing the cause to the right quarter.

When this charming and boon companion, this admirable stage-manager, was brought home dead, without anyone being able to account for the catastrophe, the excitement was intense far and near. A young colonel of dragoons, who had been paying assiduous but fruitless court to Madame Marsof, had had the widow's door closed to him immediately after the funeral. Friends had discreetly retired at the sight of Helen Marsof standing unmoved, imperturbably cold, by the body of her husband.

Not a tear did she shed, not a sigh did she utter. She simply stared at the lifeless body, nervously but mechani-

cally clasping her hands; her lips appeared to move, but no one heard a word of what she said. Then she had given her orders, the result of which was a magnificent funeral to the wealthy landed-proprietor.

With admirable composure and dignity she had received the visits of condolence and the stereotyped sympathy, after which she had wholly shut up their town house, which, in fact, she never inhabited, but which was occupied during the festive winter months by her husband. Henceforth she lived a lonely life on her estate with no one but her little boy—a delicate child, whom she worshipped, and who bore a striking likeness to his father.

It was then that for the first time the stigma flung at Marie de Medicis was uttered in connection with the death of Helen Marsof's husband. People would have it that she had not seemed sufficiently astonished at his untimely death. Some charitable busybodies—of the kind with which provincial society everywhere is especially afflicted—thought it their duty to drag particulars, if not avowals, from Helen. They went as far, on the slightest pretext, as to travel the five-and-twenty miles that lay between the county town and the manor; they came in the morning, they came in the evening, they came to take tea, they exacted hospitality for the night, they spent whole days, nay, a week. It was all in vain. They went as they had come. Helen stood her ground sadly but proudly, like a queen driven from her realm. Even the tenderness to her child did not show itself in those demonstrative fits that delight the vulgar and make them exclaim, 'How she loves her child!' Truly she loved her boy, but she loved him as she had loved her husband, inwardly, without show. Provincial people do not care about that kind of affection. Its subtlety, its

intenseness, escapes their view. They like big, sounding kisses on the cheeks of the baby, connubial endearments to the husband while leaning on his arm. Provincial society condemned Helen Marsof."

A female visitor, bolder or more tenacious than the rest, obtained one day a semi-result that filled her inquisitive soul with joy—and with horror the souls of those to whom she reported her victory. She had skilfully and insidiously led the conversation to the epoch preceding Helen Marsof's widowhood. The latter, bored and absent-minded, replied to her questioner while going on with her embroidery stretched on a large frame.

'I don't think I ever told you,' said Madame Marsof's visitor, 'when talking about those days that were so sad to you, that just about the time you lost M. Marsof, Madame Palusky . . . you remember Madame Palusky?'

Helen Marsof gave a slight shudder, and looked up. Her hand holding the needle stopped midway.

The visitor, delighted at the effect of her words, resumed:

'Of course you remember Madame Palusky—that handsome Polish woman, who suddenly left our town?'

Helen's hand dropped on the embroidery frame, and put the needle into the canvas. The visitor appeared not to notice, but went on:

'Well, she has come back again. She has been lucky enough to lose her husband, for people said he was very much in her way. He was killed in a quarrel—a duel. That, of course, is not exactly known.'

'I don't think he was very much in her way; she did not appear to mind him much,' said Helen, who had turned very pale.

'I am of your opinion, though people said the contrary; but of one thing I am certain, that if Madame Palusky did

manage to get rid of him, the thing does not lie heavily on her conscience.'

Helen Marsof left off working; she pushed away the frame. Her hand visibly shook, and to hide her emotion she began to sort some wools in her work-basket.

'Was not your husband rather attentive to her?' quoth the visitor. 'People were always saying so. Nay, according to them, he was madly in love with her.'

Helen vouchsafed no reply to this pointed question, and continued to busy herself with her basket. In no way abashed by this check, her visitor followed up the point.

'After all, it is foolish to ask you,' she laughed, 'for he would not have told you. But it was an open secret. I even think you were a little bit jealous?'

Helen Marsof merely shrugged her shoulders, and arranged her skeins of wool.

'Well, if you were jealous it was not altogether without cause. Poor M. Marsof! he was so witty, so charming, so kind——'

'To Madame Palusky,' said Helen softly, having at last selected the skein she wanted.

'Well, perhaps—— Oh, there is no doubt you were jealous—anyone could see it. But you must have been terribly upset when they brought him home dead?'

Helen did not answer. Her eyes were seemingly fixed on the skein of wool; in reality her mind had conjured up the funeral procession of her husband, with all its accompanying ceremonial. She saw the body lying in the crimson-covered coffin—the body of the beloved who two days before had left her with a cold kiss on her forehead, never to return alive. The visitor went on pitilessly:

'Yes, it must have given you a terrible shock,' she

repeated, watching for the effect the recollection of that day would produce on the face of the young widow.

'No,' murmured Helen Marsof, as if dreaming—'no; I had been expecting it for some time.'

At this unhoped-for success of her diplomacy the visitor pushed back her chair in great fright. She had but too well succeeded. What, in Heaven's name, should she do with the heavy burden of this implicit avowal she had provoked? The movement of her guest awakened Helen Marsof from her dream; she rang the bell, and called for tea. After that the conversation flagged, and the charitable lady soon took her departure. She was anxious to share the responsibility of the terrible secret with any and everybody who would accept such share.

Next day people in the county town were whispering to one another that Madame Marsof, driven mad with jealousy, had poisoned her husband, lest he should become the lover of Madame Palusky.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHILE the rumour was gaining ground and strength, Helen, who had not closed her eyes during the night, had locked herself in her bedroom. She opened a small writing-table that had belonged to her when a young girl, and took from it a scrap of crumpled paper, on which were written a few words in pencil, and scarcely legible. She knew its contents by heart; her memory, as it were, supplied the letters that had been effaced, because the paper had been folded very small, to hold between a tight-fitting glove and a hand. It had, furthermore, been lost before arriving at its destination, for otherwise it would no doubt have been destroyed. For some con-

siderable time Helen sat staring at those few lines, which to her were an instrument of torture. The hours rolled by; the summer sun was flooding the room through the open windows, and her troubled mind beheld once more the winter scene, cold and chilled, with its central point of interest—the husband lying in his coffin. Then the *venue* shifted to a scene more painful still, in which the husband went away in feverish but gladsome haste to keep his tryst with the *other one*—went away in spite of prayers, in spite of warnings, in the bitter, biting frost. Neither snow nor frost could keep the faithless husband at home; but when it became a question of returning, then there were always excuses—the thermometer was either too low, or the sun too hot, the roads were either ankle-deep in mud or knee-deep in snow.

'Why should I keep this proof of my misery?' Helen said aloud to herself. 'Am I not sufficiently certain of it?' She crumpled up the paper, then tore it into a hundred shreds, which she flung out of the window. The soft summer breeze carried them away, and made them float over the flower-beds, on which they settled at last like so many butterflies. The widow passed her wasted hand across her eyes, magnificent still, in spite of the many tears that had dimmed their lustre. 'How I loved him till the end!' she sighed.

She was disturbed in her bitter thoughts by the voice of her boy calling to her from the garden. She locked the writing-desk, cast another glance at the portrait of her husband, hanging over her bed, went up to it and kissed it reverently, and repaired to the garden.

The little lad rushed up to his mother, took her hand, which he kissed three or four times, then went on playing, picking a flower here and there. Madame Marsof strolled

slowly along the paths, her mind still busy with the past, when looking up she perceived at a few paces away from her a peasant woman who had entered the garden, and who was watching her intently. The woman bent low thrice.

'It's you, Mavra,' said Helen in a tone of ill-concealed vexation, which the woman did not, or would not, notice.

'Yes, madame, it's I. I hope thou'rt in good health.' The serf addressed her mistress in the familiar 'thou,' according to ancient custom.

'Yes, thank you. What do you want?'

The peasant woman looked furtively at Madame Marsof, and replied, with a subtle and discreet smile: 'What more should I want than the pleasure of seeing thee?'

Madame Marsof slightly inclined her head in acknowledgment, and strolled towards a clump of trees. The woman followed her boldly, but without any affectation of defiance. It was easy to notice that this plebeian felt sure of her ground, and that she had no need of permission to do as she liked. Mavra was about forty, tall and angular; the head-dress of her country, a kind of white bandage that closely enframed her face, invested with a strange expression of strength and sternness the features, jaundiced and rather tanned by years and the seasons. Large grayish-brown eyes lighted up this austere countenance, eyes which could express the whole gamut of human feelings, from the most caressing affection, the most cat-like submission to the most violent hatred and uncontrolled anger. For Madame Marsof they had never expressed aught but the former. The most candid smile, showing a set of magnificent teeth, met Madame Marsof's look at the moment when, having preceded Mavra by a few steps, she turned round and perceived the peasant woman close to her. The latter had followed her noise-

lessly, thanks to the kind of hempen shoes she wore, which did not even make the gravel creak.

'You want something, I suppose?' asked the lady, somewhat impatiently, seating herself on a wooden seat, and crossing her hands on her knees in an attitude of resigned *ennui*.

The peasant woman remained standing before her respectfully, but absolutely unembarrassed.

'That's what it is,' she said. 'Our gray cow died last night.'

Madame Marsof, with a slight shrug of the shoulders, expressed her sympathy with the fate of the poor animal, but kept silent.

'We are comfortable enough, Heaven be praised,' Mavra went on, with a somewhat proud motion of the head; 'but we have hearts in our bodies, and know what gratitude to our benefactors means. Hence I thought that your ladyship would like, perhaps, to give us another cow to replace that one.'

'Is that it?' said Madame Marsof, looking at the peasant woman more intently. 'You wish me to give you another cow. But why, seeing that you confess to being in want of nothing?'

The peasant woman modestly drooped her eyelids. Her broad smile, intelligent and loyal, lighted up her face, and she replied without the slightest embarrassment: 'Thou hast always been so kind to the child of thy regretted father-in-law. Why should it be otherwise in this case?'

In fact, Mavra's husband, Ivan Moroza, was, as his wife said, the child of the late Ivan Marsof. The latter, during his lifetime, had not been unlike a Turkish pasha, save in the matter of legitimate wives. The only legitimate spouse he ever had died a twelve-

month after the birth of his son, Nicholas. To beguile the loneliness of his widowerhood, the worthy man had sought for an attachment, or rather for a series of successive ones. These had resulted in a great many children in a comparatively small number of years.

With regard to this posterity, Ivan Marsof had laid down certain rules, from which he never deviated but once. The children came into the world, were fed and brought up in the servants' quarters, treated like the children of the other servants, who, be it said, were perfectly happy under the paternal rule of the good-natured master. He only objected when one of this progeny claimed to be somebody's child, and turned a deaf ear to any and every claim in that respect. His reasons for this behaviour were rather cynical, but there is no doubt that Ivan Marsof's logic was satisfactory to himself.

Once, and once only, he had acted differently. He had noticed a splendid creature, indeed, the daughter of a miller living a goodly distance from the home. For some time his horses' heads or his own feet were frequently turned in that direction, but he never spoke to the girl. The latter, though she had probably never heard of either Mdme. de Montespan, Mdme. de Maintenon, or Mdme. de Pompadour, was by instinct inclined to follow in the footsteps of those ladies, so one fine morning she boldly came to the 'big house' with a basket of eggs. Though there appeared to be no pressing scarcity of either eggs or cream-cheese at the manor, handsome Annoucka came often after that, but always of her own free will. The ambition of a young girl of that disposition is difficult to gauge. She had visions of being beloved, perhaps of being espoused, by the master.

Providence had no such happy fate as the latter in store for her. A twelvemonth had scarcely elapsed since her first visit when Annoucka died in giving birth to a splendid boy, who, like his father, was named Ivan.

That, however, was not sufficient. They could not call him Marsof. The little one having come into the world between Christmas and Twelfth Night, during the severe frost, the miller suggested that he should be called Moroza, which means frost. Marsof often paid visits to Ivan Moroza, who was being reared by a peasant woman in the neighbourhood. This very formidable lady-killer had conceived a by no means lukewarm passion for the handsome miller's daughter. Perhaps it was from gratitude that, notwithstanding his reputation, Annoucka had had sufficient courage to 'throw herself at his head,' as it were. At any rate, he tacitly acknowledged that Ivan was his son, and from the very first moment showed himself particularly interested in the boy.

The old miller died, and another miller reigned in his stead. Ivan Moroza grew up in the neighbourhood of the manor, his nurse became an inmate of the master's house in some domestic capacity. This gave the lad an additional opportunity for throwing himself more frequently into the master's path. Marsof had particular notions with regard to the boy's education.

'I do not want him to be a servant; Moroza shall be a farmer.'

Of course Marsof meant a farmer in the Russian sense, and to this end gave Ivan, when he grew to man's estate, a good cottage and a capital plot of ground of which to make a kitchen garden. Later on he provided him with beehives, fruit-trees, and even flower-seeds from his own private stock. The legitimate son was meanwhile serving his time among the pages of the Emperor. Before that

Marsof had often sent for the young peasant lad to beguile the tedious winter afternoons, and had spent much of his leisure time in teaching him to read. Moroza could read and write before he was sixteen, which in those days was a very notable exception among his class.

During one of the periodical stays of young Marsof under the paternal roof, his father said to him:

'There has been a great deal of talk about Ivan Moroza; but, after all, people only told the truth. You and he have the same blood in your veins. Don't forget that you are his master, and never make the mistake of treating him as an equal, but at the same time never forget that he is your brother, and don't attempt to humiliate him.'

Young Marsof, as we have already said, was of a sweet and easy disposition, as affectionate as he was harum-scarum. He obeyed the instructions of his father, but he obeyed them too well, not wisely; he brought somewhat too great a brotherly tenderness to bear upon the relations between himself and Ivan Moroza.

Ivan, who was perfectly aware of everything concerning himself, did his best to show himself a good brother and respectful serf towards his brother and master, his senior by but a couple of years. He made himself useful, then almost indispensable. He had married, while still very young, a good-looking girl, the daughter of a well-to-do peasant. They had no children, and the whole of their ambition turned towards the manor.

When Marsof married Helen, the latter soon perceived that the Morozas were rather irrepressible. Moroza was Marsof's steward; he had the keys of the granaries, he superintended the cattle, he sold the crops. The young wife, who had a natural aptitude for business, would

have liked to look a little more closely into the accounts. In one word, and with a charming smile, her husband gave her the clue to all those favours bestowed upon Moroza. He himself thought it the most natural thing in the world to be employing his brother, albeit an illegitimate one, and who furthermore appeared to have his interests at heart.

Madame Marsof returned to the charge, until the husband became weary of the repeated attacks, and made up his mind not to heed them. Then Helen also determined to let the thing drop, and matters went on as usual.

Meanwhile the Morozas had become very well-to-do indeed, and though comparatively young—for he was barely forty—Ivan was the *starchina* of the village—that is to say, its elder, and his voice carried much weight in the Communal Councils. He had managed the division of land so cleverly, managed so well to please everyone, as to elicit in return the good-will of the whole. His fellow-peasants considered him their intellectual superior, still, 'he is one of us,' they said. 'He is the son of a peasant girl, and he is cleverer than the master.' There is no need to determine the foundation for this universally favourable opinion; nevertheless, since the master's death the Morozas were not without serious misgivings. They had at all times suspected a secret hostility on the young widow's part; she had been appointed trustee for her son during the latter's minority. For form's sake a second trustee had been appointed. He, however, lived at St. Petersburg, and did not trouble much. Hence the efforts of Ivan and Mavra necessarily tended towards the maintenance of the position they had attained by patience and persevering watchfulness.

Had the young heir been alone, their happiness would

have been complete. Assisted by their fellow-peasants, who never lost sight of their own interests, they could have done any and everything they liked; nothing would have been easier than to extend the limits of their own fields, and to include the best plantations of the forests into them. Truly, the community at large, and not they themselves directly, would have benefited by those improvements to their well-being; but the weal of the whole is paramount to all other considerations. And the position of general benefactor was also not to be despised, apart from the fact that the water thus stored might have proved good fishing in more spots than one.

Moroza and his wife had none of the exaggerated ambition often aspiring to the impossible. They did not for a single moment dream of inhabiting the manor and of dining off silver plate. Mavra had never looked with the smallest pang of envy at the velvet gowns of Helen Marsof. The dream of the Morozas was to be the first in the village. They were that already, but everyone knows that there are different ways of being first. Their ambition was to live in a large and handsome *isba*, much larger and loftier than the others. Their fertile imagination reconstructed, without having ever beheld them, the spacious *teremas* of the old lords of the soil, *teremas* the walls of which consisted of immense deal logs, *teremas* in which European refinement and taste were unknown. Mavra already beheld herself arrayed in a handsome *donchayreïka*, or jacket, of crimson flowered silk, ornamented with broad gold lace, in the pearl-embroidered mitre that constitutes the festal head-dress of the women of her province; she already beheld herself, her hand delicately toying with the bright-coloured silken handkerchief, and holding receptions in the large room of the *isba*. It was decorated with delicate fretw

in deal, its table was covered with the Russian cloth of fine linen, relieved by flaring embroideries in red, and laden with honeycomb, hazel-nuts, and cakes, made by her own hands, with *kvass* and *hydromel*. There was not a lady among her guests, yet all these peasant women were virtually her subjects, for she was the richest and most influential among them; still they were her equals, for was she not a peasant woman, as they were? It was the strange dream of a mind sufficiently perverted to conceive crimes, sufficiently new to the world to be content with the outward splendour of her own rank, without asking or wishing to change her station.

It was Mavra who served as intermediary between her husband and her widowed mistress since the death of the master. Moroza disliked the mourning garments of Helen; he felt uncomfortable at the steadfast gaze of those blue eyes, which, as it were, seemed to read his inmost thoughts, and in which he discerned a kind of lofty contempt.

Mavra had no such scruples. During the first five or six months that elapsed since the master's death she had transmitted all the messages relating to business, which, as well as other matters, she understood as thoroughly as her husband. On the day of which we are treating, she had come to reconnoitre how far Helen's patience would go, if the mistress would not at last refuse her something for which she asked, to determine whether the auspicious moment had come to attempt beginning the execution of plans so skilfully prepared long beforehand.

So she kept standing in front of Helen, submissive and gentle apparently, in reality prepared to spring upon her like a panther watching its prey.

'The son of my father-in-law!' repeated Helen Marsof,

with a contemptuous smile; 'I suppose it is a good title to adopt in order to obtain a favour. Never mind—what you do want is a cow?'

'Yes, madame.'

'Very well, take one from among the herd; there are enough and to spare. Your husband knows the exact number; I don't. And now go.'

Instead of going, the peasant woman bowed low before Helen, and pressed her lips to the shoulder of her dress. This mark of respect appeared not to produce the slightest effect.

'Farewell,' said Helen, averting her head.

But Mavra had stuck herself once more in front of her mistress with the same loyal smile, showing her magnificent white teeth.

'What more do you want?' asked Madame Marsof, who scarcely ever adopted the 'thou' with Mavra. Helen showed her surprise in spite of herself.

'I must speak to thee,' said the peasant. 'Sacha, my darling young master, go and play a little further on.'

Alexander, in spite of the pet name given to him, did not comply at once. He first looked at Mavra, then at his mother. Seeing a passing cloud of doubt and anger on the latter's face, he slowly strolled away, and at last went into the house.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

'THOU art more favoured by Heaven than I am,' said the peasant woman. 'God has given thee a child, and I have none.'

Madame Marsof uttered a deep sigh, and looked after her retreating boy. He was her only happiness left on earth.

'Thou hast been very fortunate in being able to rear him,' Mavra went on; 'for if he were dead also, thou wouldst only have a seventh part of the property as a widow.'

'If he were dead also,' repeated the widow, crossing herself as if to avert the peril. 'May God preserve us from such a disaster.'

The astute peasant woman imitated her mistress's example, but her appeal to Providence was more demonstrative than that of the other. Her arm described a magnificent curve, while her body was almost bent in twain as she uttered the supplication. In another moment she went on.

'Thou art very rich now, until thy son comes of age.'

'I was rich before my marriage,' coldly replied Helen Marsof. 'What are you driving at?'

'Those who are rich are sure to provoke much envy; it is but natural,' remarked Mavra. 'There are many people that envy thee, and they speak ill of thee.'

'Oh,' said the widow, carefully scrutinizing the impassive face of her quondam sister-in-law. 'How do you know?'

'I have been told so by everybody,' replied Mavra in a placid tone, 'and I deemed it well to inform thee, for thou

shouldst have the means of giving the lie to those who invented the slander.'

'The means? To give the lie? To give the lie to what? Great heavens! You, as well as everyone else, know very well that I have not failed in a single one of my duties.'

Mavra did not answer. She was preparing her blow.

'Of what do they accuse me?' said the widow impatiently. 'Seeing that you began this, you must go to the end.'

The peasant woman looked her mistress full in the face. The smile played upon her lips once more; then she said calmly:

'They say that the death of the master has never been explained, and that you were the only one to benefit by it.'

'That I alone have benefited by the death of the master!' repeated Helen, with a yell, and bounding from the seat, as if moved by a spring. 'I have benefited by it!' she said once more. 'You lying wretch!' With a magnificent swing of her right hand she smote Mavra on the cheek. The latter neither winced nor budged. She merely passed her sleeve across her face, while her mistress, quivering with rage, remained standing before her, looking daggers at her. 'That I alone benefited by it!' she said for the third time, as if to engrave the sentence upon her memory. 'I, who have always loved and worshipped him, in spite of everything; I, who pardoned every day of his life; I, who have mourned and wept for him every hour since his death; I, who will wear everlasting black for the man whom I loved, but who did not love me!'

'I do not know, mistress, why thou hast deigned to be angry,' gently remonstrated the peasant woman. 'I

warned thee that what I was about to say was for thy good, and thou hast treated me as if I came to do thee evil.'

Helen sank back on the seat; her anger had suddenly subsided.

'They have said this thing!' she murmured. 'Who has said it?'

'The people all round us, from what I can hear,' replied Mavra.

'And you cannot manage to defend me? You and your husband are the authorities of these people. You are much more the masters here than I am, and you cannot impose silence upon them—you cannot make them ashamed of such a suspicion? But I forgot: you both hate me, and you rejoice in hearing me insulted.'

'Excuse us, mistress,' said Mavra humbly; 'thou seest that we only wish thy welfare; we are thy humble slaves. Our late master, Ivan, has given Moroza his freedom; still, we know that we were but born to serve thee.'

The latter remark of the astute peasant woman was not uttered without intention. She meant to remind the widow of the independent position of her steward. Moroza could go if he liked, realize his fortune, and leave the widow with a burdened estate, the accounts of which, thanks to his system of prevarication—not to say worse—were as entangled as they well could be. Helen felt herself powerless to accept this burden; its weight increased by her responsibility towards her son in her capacity as trustee. She gave way, lest everything else should give way beneath her.

'I know,' she said at last, with an effort, 'that both of you are not ill-natured. But why have you told me all this? Was I not sufficiently wretched already?'

'I have told thee because if thou hadst, perhaps, the

smallest proof—a scrap of paper that might explain the master's conduct—thou mightst have confided it to us, and we could have shown it.'

Helen thought of the small scrap of paper she had destroyed that very morning, and the abyss yawning at her feet seemed to get deeper and deeper.

'I have nothing,' she said.

'Nevertheless thou knowest, as well as we do, that the master did not die a natural death.'

'It may be so,' replied the widow; 'I do not know.'

'But if it be so,' insisted Mavra, the unholy fire of satisfied vengeance gleaming in her eyes, 'why didst not thou apply to the authorities? They would have inquired into it.'

Helen had been looking down; now that she raised her eyes and met those of the peasant, she could perceive nothing in them but pity and friendship.

'You are right,' said Helen; 'there ought to have been an inquiry, and then people would have learnt that my husband committed suicide for a Polish woman.'

'Thou dost think, then, that he killed himself for the Polish woman?' said Mavra eagerly.

Her accent had betrayed the pleasure Helen's explanation had afforded her.

'And you,' asked Madame Marsof, transfixing her with a look, 'what did you think?'

'I,' said the peasant woman defiantly—'I thought that they had put something in his food to "calm" him.' The words 'to calm' in Russian also mean to send one to sleep for ever. 'Such things have been done before now,' Mavra went on quite composedly. 'There are jealous wives who give their husbands love philtres to regain their affections, and sometimes the thing turns out wrong.'

'That's all very well for those who believe in love philtres,' remarked Helen contemptuously. 'Then you also accuse me?'

'Heaven preserve me from such a thought! The Polish woman might have given him a draught like that.'

'There was no need for her to do it. He was bound hand and foot without,' said Helen bitterly.

'Well, mistress, thou seest well enough that it would have been better to have had an inquiry.'

'You tell me six months after the event, when the time for it has gone by. Why did you not tell me before?'

'People kept their mouths shut in those days,' coolly answered Mavra. 'I am going, mistress. Have you any message for Moroza?'

'Nothing, Mavra; and pray excuse my quickness of temper just now.'

'It's nothing, mistress—nothing at all. Don't trouble about it.'

Saying which, the peasant woman stooped low to kiss her mistress's hand. Submissive and affectionate as was the movement, it smacked as much of the quondam sister-in-law as of the steward's wife. Then the peasant woman slowly left the garden.

Helen looked after her until she had disappeared.

'My evil genius,' she said aloud. 'That woman will be my ruin.'

The rumour alluded to by Mavra, sprung one knew not whence, like all slander, was spreading throughout the [illegible]. It was to the effect that Madame Marsof, [illegible] the conjugal infidelity of her husband, who [illegible] substance upon other women, had poisoned [illegible] in order to solely enjoy the property of her son [illegible] minority, which was to be a long one.

Like all wicked and venomous gossip, the rumour took wings; it got as far as St. Petersburg; it insinuated itself everywhere. Countess Gretzky was one of the first to be told of it. She merely shrugged her shoulders. She knew her niece too well to believe for one moment in such an infamous charge; she even wrote to her to induce her to come to the capital on a visit, deeming rightly that Helen's presence in her aunt's house would put a curb on the tongues of the most hardened and obstinate back-biters. But Helen's son having fallen ill with scarlatina, the journey was postponed. Other plans interfered, and that one was allowed to drop, the Countess trusting to time to do the rest.

Valerian Gretzky took a different view of the question. He did not know his sister well. Being somewhat older than he, and having been brought up amidst different surroundings, she impressed him as proud, while she only had a proper sentiment of her dignity. He thought her vindictive; she was simply contemptuously indifferent to insults levelled at her by those too much beneath her. Hence he had no great difficulty in persuading himself that in a violent fit of jealousy she had preferred the death of a faithless and ungrateful husband to the tortures of seeing him happy with a rival.

At any rate, if he did not think Helen guilty, he was not sufficiently convinced of her innocence to dare to defend her. She wrote him letter after letter—those that Raïssa had read—to induce him to come to her, to at least protect her by his presence. He replied in a lukewarm way, lost time, until at last his sister guessed at the cause of his hesitation.

That also was a terrible blow to her; nevertheless, she bore it with courage. Henceforth everything was different to her. Deserted by her familiars, with the

whole of the province pointing its finger at her, she often met in her walks over the estate the eyes of the peasants indignantly and angrily looking at her. She knew well enough what it meant, and replied to the looks, or, rather, did not reply to them, with an icy indifference that pretended to see nothing, hear nothing, suspect nothing. After that some of them began to be afraid of her.

The Morozas, meanwhile, continued their unholy, underhanded work. The estates that year yielded a crop superior to that of many previous years, but the peasants' plots were, apparently, still more favoured in that respect, for it was the communal domain that had the lion's share. Ivan Moroza hinted everywhere that the mistress was no longer satisfied with his management, that he was well aware of it, and that he would be only too glad to go if he could find a situation elsewhere. Delighted with their elder, who looked so well to their interest as to have considerably enriched the community since he managed their business, the peasants began to grumble, and at last almost openly showed their hostility to Madame Marsof. They still bowed to her, but with a look that was tantamount to the flinging of a stone. In a very short while she confined her walks to the precincts of her own garden, and lived solitarily with her boy, asking herself, her heart bursting with grief, how long this martyrdom would last, and what would be the upshot of it.

CHAPTER XXIX.

[illegible] GRETZKY, in redemption of her promise, had [illegible] to her niece to tell her of Valerian's marriage.

'[illegible] mad act on the part of a young man,' she said,

'has been severely punished. I myself have played a part in the bringing about of the punishment which at all costs I would have avoided, but it was to be. I would sooner not give you the painful particulars, and let me say a few words of her who henceforth, whether we like it or not, is my niece and your sister-in-law. She is a young girl of very humble origin, without fortune, but with a fair education. Her moral character is beyond reproach; her principles are worthy of all respect, as far as I can see. If, as is most likely, she goes to the country to live on Valerian's estate, she will, of course, be your neighbour. You may, perhaps, have an opportunity of seeing her; at any rate, people will tell you about her. Keep me posted up in what you hear, for this young girl appeared to me to be neither an adventuress nor a mere vulgar nobody; and if for no other reason than my interest in Valerian, her doings will always have an interest for me.'

The few families of the provincial nobility which, to kill time or from mere idle curiosity, had continued to visit Madame Marsof now and then, hastened to announce to Helen the arrival of her sister-in-law. The most wonderful rumours had been spread in connection with young Countess Gretzky. The strange manner in which the marriage had been brought about by superior orders was but too well calculated to exercise all minds. Consequently people went for further particulars to Helen Marsof. But the latter knew nothing more than what her aunt had told her, and that was much less than what the good souls themselves had invented. As a matter of course, she was soon as solitary as before.

At first people had taken a solemn pledge not to call upon or receive Raïssa, the daughter of a mere army surgeon, a young woman who had figured so con-

spicuously in a most extraordinary adventure. People communicated to each other in low whispers particulars that absolutely made them shudder, which also went far to prove that if virtue disappeared from every other corner of the earth, it would be useless to go and look for it in an outlying Russian province. Whence had those details come? The good souls who so assiduously propagated them would have been considerably puzzled to indicate their authorities. Nevertheless, it was unanimously decided at a ball given by the provincial nobility that no one should call upon young Countess Gretzky.

'If her sister-in-law Marsof and she manage to hit it off, they'll have it all to themselves. They are just fit to keep one another company,' said Madame Palusky. The lady had resumed her old position since her widowhood, and the Governor-General of the province, by his openly expressed admiration, had in no small degree contributed to this resumption.

'We shall not commit ourselves with this girl,' concluded another lady.

This one was decidedly less illustrious than the handsome Madame Palusky, though her 'signal obscurity' was a crying injustice, for, indeed, she had given notoriety as many opportunities to have her name blazoned about as the Polish madam.

Raïssa was perfectly indifferent to all these noble resolutions. She had reached the estate one magnificent May evening; the sun had not disappeared from the horizon, though his faint rays filtering through the young foliage showed that it was getting late. The herds had returned from the fields, but the slight tinkling of tiny bells was but a faint indication of their plentiful numbers in the cowhouses. The garden, full of sweet spring flowers, seemed a perfect Eden with its perfume of

moist verdure; the cool evening breeze pervaded the whole.

Raïssa, when alighting from her carriage, found herself standing in front of a lofty stone dwelling, whitewashed from the base to the ledge of the roof. The latter was made of zinc, painted green, like every roof of a Russian country house, conscious of its own dignity. The whole produced a cheerful, though a somewhat sober, effect. The young Countess found all the servants from St. Petersburg, who had preceded her, assembled in the great hall. They received her with every mark of respect. Then she was conducted to a room on the ground-floor, forming part of a suite of apartments furnished in the old style. At last she was left alone, with two candles burning on the table, and facing the portrait of the late Countess, Valerian's mother.

Dropping her travelling cloak, Raïssa took up one of the candles, stepped up to the picture, and looked at it attentively for some minutes. The handsome woman, in a low-necked dress, a magnificent piece of lace setting off the marble-white shoulders, a superb pearl necklace encircling the swan-like throat, smiled sweetly. The likeness to Valerian, though obvious, was not striking; but Raïssa perceived it at once. She placed the candle on the writing-table, and drew still closer to the painting. In the semi-darkness, the portrait assumed a weird though sweet look. The eyes seemed to call the young woman, who knelt before the image of her husband's mother.

'You,' she murmured—'you know well enough that I love him. Pray for me that he may be less cruel.'

* * * * *

During her first week at Komarino Raïssa was exceedingly puzzled to find her way through the various apart-

ments, passages, landings, etc., along the numberless outhouses, servants' quarters, and so forth, to the villages extending over an area of twelve by seventeen kilomètres. Its forests, its ponds teeming with fish, its rivers, its fields and grass lands, seemed to her so many creations of an over-excited brain; so many heads of cattle found no precedent in her imagination. It took her fully a fortnight to assimilate the names and functions of the squad of servants who spent their days in the hall, and outhouses, doing nothing. Aladdin was not more astonished than she, when she beheld all those genii, the slaves of the wonderful lamp.

Nevertheless, after a little while, Raïssa became used to her new position. A month had scarcely gone by, when she began to have an insight into her own affairs—an insight so clear, in fact, as to lead to the dismissal of the steward.

It was about that time that she received a visit at which she felt more surprised than pleased. One day, after a hurried luncheon, as she was preparing to go out, they told her that Mavra Moroza wished to speak to her.

'Who is Mavra Moroza?' asked Raïssa of Fadéi, who scarcely ever left her side now.

'Not much; at any rate, not much good,' growled the old servant; 'but you had better see her, madame. It is as well to know what she wants of you.'

Mavra was shown in. At the first glance Raïssa noticed the difference of expression between the prudent and [illegible] look and the would-be winning, frank smile [illegible] visitor. To Raïssa, who, though young, had been [illegible] already, and had gained so much experi- [illegible] disparity was so shocking as to put her on her [illegible]rd.

'What do you want with me?' she said to the peasant woman.

'We wish to congratulate thee on the subject of thy arrival,' replied Mavra with a low bow, 'and offer a welcome to the mistress of these domains.'

'To which of my villages do you belong?'

'To none, madame. I am the wife of the steward of thy sister-in-law, Helen Marsof, and I live on her estate, out yonder.'

Mavra's hand pointed to the park of Madame Marsof, which could be seen from the window, and spread as far as the public road. Scarcely a verst divided the two houses, and it was this fatal contiguity that had led to the marriage of Helen Gretzky with young Marsof.

'Indeed,' said Raïssa, thinking that the woman must have been sent as a scout by her neighbour, in order to report to her what she had gathered. 'You are the wife of her steward. Well, why do you come to see me?'

'To make thy acquaintance,' replied Mavra, smiling, and with a knowing gleam in her eyes.

Fadéi, who had stood by silently, and who had not taken his eyes off the visitor, now turned his back to her. He had evidently had enough of her; for taking Heaven to witness, as it were, with regard to the woman's duplicity, by raising his hands, he left the apartment.

'You are very good,' replied Raïssa, in a slightly ironical tone. 'What can I do for you?'

'Nothing at all, but as thou dost not know these parts, I thought that thou mightest like someone to explain to thee.'

'I have got Fadéi,' interrupted Raïssa haughtily.

'Fadéi has been away so long; there are many things he does not know,' replied Mavra, looking towards the window in an off-hand way.

Raïssa remembered that her old retainer had pretty well told her the same thing; she hoped to draw from her what Fadéi had been unwilling to tell her.

'Is it true,' said Mavra, without showing the slightest embarrassment, 'that thy husband has been sent to Siberia by order of our father the Czar?'

A deep frown overspread Raïssa's brow. As yet no one had dared to speak to her in that way about her misfortunes. Nevertheless, she could but reply. But in her turn she wished to interrogate.

'It is true,' she said curtly. 'What do they say about it in your parts?'

'We think that the lords are our masters, but that the Czar is the master of our lords. What the Czar does is well done; we love the Czar.'

In fact, Gretzky's fate had only affected his servants. The peasants, without exactly being able to put it in so many words, were almost glad at the thought that their absolute master, in those days of servitude, was at the mercy of someone, exactly as they were at his mercy. The sovereign's hand laid heavily on Gretzky taught them that there existed a superior power to which, perhaps, in case of need, they might appeal. To those untutored minds, Raïssa was an envoy of the omnipotent ruler, and as such had the right to claim and would receive unconditional submission.

Raïssa understood this in a moment, and rejoiced inwardly not to have to engage in a struggle with the people, however feeble they might be, with regard to the [illegible] which she had been invested.

[illegible] think that the people will like me?' she said [illegible]

[illegible] certainly like thee, madame; it is thy sister-in-law who does not like thee,' said the peasant woman,

blinking discreetly in the direction of Helen Marsof's house.

'I have not done her any harm,' said Raïssa, somewhat sadly. 'I hope to succeed in making her like me also.'

The peasant woman shook her head twice or thrice with a strange and deeply significant negative motion. The rest of her body was perfectly still.

'She is not the woman to like anyone. She is a good mistress, but she has no love or like to bestow.'

Raïssa was thinking of the bundle of letters she had found in the drawer of Gretzky's writing-table. The letters were those of a woman who knows how to love. A second barrier of distrust against Mavra arose by the side of the first.

'Shalt thou go and see her?' asked Mavra in her sweetest and most insinuating tone.

'If I thought that she would receive me I should certainly go,' replied Raïssa. 'Have you been charged to tell me?'

The peasant woman repeated the strange motion which made her look like a wooden puppet, but her eyes went on blinking now and then, and the smile passed fitfully across her face.

'She has a mortal grudge against thee,' she said quietly.

'That is not very surprising,' replied Raïssa.

'She says all the harm she can of thee,' continued the peasant woman.

Raïssa had a great mind to bundle her out of the room, but she restrained herself. Mavra went on:

'She is very foolish and wrong. She ought rather to try to make friends. Thou art protected by the Czar.'

'Yes,' replied Raïssa, not without an inward pang of bitterness.

'Well, thy sister-in-law ought to have asked thy protection to arrange this ugly bit of business of hers.'

'What ugly bit of business?'

'Thou dost not know, then?' asked Mavra; and, without leaving Raïssa time to answer, she added: 'Still, everybody about here does know that our late master died in a very strange manner. The lady probably does know how it happened, seeing that she lodged no complaint.'

'You are the wife of her steward?' asked Raïssa quietly.

'Yes, madame.'

'You eat her bread, and at the same time you go about slandering your mistress in that way.'

Mavra became aware that she had made a mistake.

'Our mistress!' she said; 'our mistress! She is our mistress because it pleases us. We are free, we are. My husband has got noble blood in his veins.'

'Go,' said Raïssa, pointing to the door.

'We shall meet again, madame,' replied Mavra, smiling as usual, and putting on her most winning look. 'We shall meet again; and thou wilt know where to find me when thou art in want of me.'

Saying which, she left the room so rapidly as to give Raïssa no time to add a word.

For a little while Raïssa paced up and down the room, too upset by this strange scene to be able to act. But at last she seemed to have made up her mind. She rang the bell, and when Fadéi appeared in answer to the summons, went straight to the point.

'I must know the whole truth about the circumstances attending M. Marsof's death. The time for keeping silent is gone by. Tell me all you know.'

The old man knew but little. He told his mistress

what had occurred, and the subsequent rumours. He evidently shared the opinion of his master.

Without exactly believing in Madame Marsof's guilt, he remained in doubt. His conclusion, like that of all the others, was this: 'She ought to have asked for an inquiry.'

'It is true,' said Raïssa to herself. 'She ought to have asked for an inquiry.' But suddenly the truth, the truth in which Madame Marsof believed, flashed upon her mind in all its nakedness. 'She believed that he killed himself,' she said almost aloud.

Fadéi had not been particularly tender with regard to Madame Palusky, and Raïssa for a moment suspected the latter of having had recourse to poison. For a moment only, for she immediately came to the conclusion that Madame Marsof's silence could only be accounted for on the supposition of suicide. Raïssa refused to believe in the guilt of her who had written such touching letters. Dismissing Fadéi, she locked herself in her room to once more read those letters, without a pang of conscience this time. Henceforth one thought was uppermost in her mind, and sustained her throughout, to clear Helen's reputation of this terrible slander. Full of this generous resolve, she knelt before the portrait of the late Countess.

'Mother,' she prayed, 'she is your daughter also. Let me save your daughter; perhaps your son will pardon me.'

CHAPTER XXX.

WHILE Raïssa, still greatly excited by the occurrences of the morning, sat brooding and brooding over the fatal problem, a new caller was announced. That one had

not come on foot; a carriage, covered with dust, and drawn by four grays, had made its way to the stable-yard, while its occupant was entering the house. The visitor was shown into the drawing-room. Raïssa put a lace mantilla on her magnificent auburn hair, and went down wondering who this visitor could be, the first 'who had honoured her' in that way, for Mavra, from a social standpoint, could not be called a visitor. It was a lady belonging to the provincial nobility, the owner of a very large estate, rather independent in her disregard of conventionalities—the very lady who, when Raïssa's name had been broached, had declared that 'it would not do to take up with this girl.' Upon second thoughts, however, she had come to the conclusion that Raïssa would make a capital addition to her set, deficient in young women. Madame Perscanof was received everywhere, but people did not often go to her 'at homes.' She was ambitious to shine in that respect, and to have nothing but men and always men was somewhat compromising. Raïssa, informed by Fadéi, was very polite, but very reserved. She did not wish to make an enemy of the first woman who took the trouble to call, but neither did she wish to make a friend of her. She succeeded to perfection. Instead of inviting her visitor to share her repast, as is the custom in the provinces, she had refreshments brought up, and gave orders to put back the dinner for two hours, so that no whiff from the kitchen should betray the preparations not intended for Madame Perscanof. The latter went home starved, but persuaded [illegible] dined at eight according to English fashion. Nevertheless, she told everyone who cared to listen that the young Countess was charming; but that truly she [illegible] herself to provincial customs and dine somewhat earlier.

Other visitors followed in the course of time, and if among the men and women who crossed Raïssa's threshold there were some who went back voting her a bit of a prig, the majority of those who themselves were worth anything conceived a genuine esteem for her. People had come out of curiosity, they returned out of sympathy; and at the end of six months, if society still pitied Valerian Gretzky, it was on account of having to live far from so charming a woman.

Raïssa had seriously taken to her position as lady of the manor, and added the part of 'Lady Bountiful.' Her heart, still lacerated, felt fewer pangs amidst the peaceful routine of this well-spent life. Every day, unless the weather was too bad, she went to one of her villages, either on foot or in her carriage. She rarely, if ever, went without a provision of medicaments, creature comforts, linen and clothing for the poor. No day passed without her alleviating some misery, binding up some wound. Her inherent deftness and skill, improved by her father's lessons, had rendered her dear to those poor and humble folk, often stricken down with illness, sometimes grievously wounded, always more or less in want.

They called her the good Countess, and in a little while the peasants of her own vast estate were not the only ones to claim her help. The serfs of Madame Marsof came to her more than once; and upon these, more than upon any others, she lavished care, substance, and time. She hoped that her sister-in-law would sooner or later feel grateful to her for this charity.

Helen Marsof, like most Russian ladies, practised more or less the art of domestic medicine, but she was far from knowing as much about it as Raïssa. Her loyal nature took no umbrage at this superiority. On the contrary, she often sent her own patients to her sister-

in-law, assuring them that the latter would cure their ailments better than she could.

The charity and dignified behaviour of the young woman had made a deep impression on Helen Marsof's character: so that one day she sat down to write to her brother. With the exception of a few hurried lines, sent to him in the first outburst of her grief at the fate that had overwhelmed him, she had not written to Valerian.

'Your wife,' she said, 'is a very extraordinary woman. Her kindness knows no bounds, her benevolence takes no count of obstacles. The peasants are happier, I believe, than they have ever been before. But pray do not run away with the idea that I wish to become intimate with her. I know what you are suffering, and nothing, not even my loneliness, will make me forget it. But you may, at any rate, be certain that your name is nobly borne. Fadéi told me that your income is remitted to you. I am not the least surprised, because this seems to me wholly in accordance with the character and actions of this young woman. Amidst your great misfortunes you ought to thank Heaven, for no harm will come to either your property or to the honour of your family and yours.'

At the reading of this letter Valerian grew pale with rage. The week previously he had received the moneys transmitted by Fadéi. With the funds the old servant had enclosed the accounts of the half-year, carefully copied out in a large and firm hand.

'It's madame who looks to all the accounts,' Fadéi [illegible] said. 'She has dismissed the steward, and the [illegible] alone has fetched seven thousand roubles more than [illegible]. As for the hay, it was unfortunately too late [illegible] madame came the thief had sold it before it was

stacked, and he received a deposit, which, of course, he has pocketed.'

'The devil take the old idiot,' growled Valerian, looking angrily at the array of figures. 'Is he going to sing the praises of this woman all his life long?'

His sister's letter drove to a higher pitch still this irritation, for ever fed by wounded pride. He could not acknowledge any merit in Raïssa, for to have done this would have increased his wrongs towards her. But he was the first to suffer from the evil of which he had been the cause, for in his inmost heart he felt that he owed all the material comforts of his present existence to the generosity of her whom he had outraged, and that thought hurt him more than all the rest.

His friends Sabakine and Rézof had also received the whole proceeds of their estates. Each, by agreement with the other, had written to Raïssa a letter of thanks 'cold and short.' It would have seemed to them unbecoming not to acknowledge at least by a simple and polite formality the generous and loyal behaviour of the young wife.

The relatives of the exiles had been told of Raïssa's action, and were unable to conceal from their friends what was going on in Siberia; public opinion, so bitterly hostile but a short time since to the young Countess, underwent one of those sudden reactions on which it is almost safe to count. After having dragged her through the mud, people extolled her to the skies.

Princess Adine, especially, felt aroused to such enthusiasm as to be found one morning by her husband packing her trunks. Nothing would satisfy her but to go and compliment Raïssa personally on her noble conduct. In order to keep her at home, the Court Chamberlain was obliged not to point out to her the 'bad form'

of such a step—that would have been useless—but to refuse her the money for the journey. The Princess submitted amidst a deluge of tears, and sulked with her husband for a week.

In due time Fadéi got his master's answer; it was a long letter, for Valerian seemed to become attached once more to the things of this world. He told his faithful servant to carefully look after his favourite horse and his leash of greyhounds; he spoke of the furniture of his private sitting-room, and mentioned a houka of great price which he wanted sent to him at the first opportunity; he inquired whether his mother's grave was kept in good condition, and promised to write soon to his sister.

Fadéi brought this letter to his mistress. Had not she a better right to read it than he? While Raïssa was scanning its contents he looked at her, lovingly, pityingly. He alone of all those around her, of everyone on the earth, had fathomed the secret of the young woman's tears, of her long musings in the armchair of his master, which he had pointed out to her on her arrival. He alone had guessed the meaning of the longing and loving looks at the portrait of the dead Countess. Valerian had asked whether his mother's grave was properly cared for. It had certainly in his time never had so many roses in summer, so many other floral ornaments in autumn. The anniversaries of the deaths in the family were observed at Komarino with prayers as in the lifetime of the old Countess. Never had their memory been so piously kept while Valerian was absent.

When she had finished reading, Raïssa held out the letter to Fadéi, who took it reverently.

'If madame would like to keep it,' he said haltingly, 'she might otherwise not remember.'

Raïssa stretched forth her hand; its fingers shook palpably as Fadéi placed the sheet of paper between them. They displayed no jewel, nothing but the wedding-ring. The hands closed nervously, the eyelids of Raïssa, Countess Gretzky, quivered, and the old servant stooped low and humbly kissed the golden circlet.

'There is nothing for madame,' he said in a gentle voice. 'The master ought to have sent a word of thanks.'

Averting her head, Raïssa endeavoured to impose silence with a gentle wave of the hand, but Fadéi went on, though speaking more gently still:

'I have told the master that his wife is beloved by everyone. He knows that she does everything for him better than he could do it himself. Perhaps one day the Almighty may open his heart.'

Fadéi's voice had sunk to a whisper, and at last it died away altogether. Raïssa nodded kindly, but without looking up. Two big tears coursed down her cheeks and lost themselves in the folds of her black dress, for her year of mourning was not over. The old servant stole away on tip-toe, and Raïssa was left alone. Then, with a choking sob, her head dropped on the paper in which Valerian spoke of everything except of her.

CHAPTER XXXI.

WINTER had come again with its snow, frost, and cold, like the year before. The previous day mass had been performed at the church for the repose of the soul of Anna Porof. It was exactly a twelvemonth since the poor woman had died, since Raïssa had returned home dishonoured to strike the mortal blow to this mother, so

tenderly beloved. This anniversary, doubly painful, had plunged the young wife into a whirlpool of contending thoughts. Shame, anger, the recollection of the outrage, had almost swamped the feeling of appeasement that had floated uppermost for some time. All the tears shed at that horrible period, the revolting ideas that had accompanied the insult, drifted back from the past and harrowed the soul of the unhappy woman.

It was late, the great clock in Valerian's room had struck the second hour after midnight, and still Raïssa, battling with her gnawing memories, was not thinking of bed.

'It is he who killed my mother,' she said almost aloud, while pacing up and down with the regularity of a pendulum. 'It is he or another, for after all I do not know which . . . but for one of them my mother would still be alive and happy, my father would be with us in the small wooden house with its wealth of flowers.' An agonising wrench tugged at Raïssa's heartstrings. 'Yes,' she hissed, 'I hate him, this man; he has done me nothing but harm. I must hate him; I will hate him.' The poor girl was so much bent upon hating him in order to guard against loving him. Then she burst into tears. 'Wretch that I am, not even knowing what I do want, what I do feel! A shattered life, a ruined life is mine, for I am neither maid, wife, nor widow.'

For a moment she stood the picture of an antique fury; then she dropped into her husband's armchair, facing the portrait of his mother. If they had restored her parents to her, if the little wooden tenement with its wealth of flowers had been once more at her disposal, if both parents and dwelling could have been by a miracle secured to her on condition that she should cease to think of Valerian, that she should banish his image from

her life for evermore: would she have consented? She was going to ask herself the question, and she recoiled in horror at the thought that she would hesitate in her reply Hesitate in her reply! was it not proclaiming herself the veriest monster?

The door of the room was violently thrown back. Never had such a thing happened at so late an hour, and Raïssa turned her head astounded at the intrusion. A woman wrapt in a long fur cloak stiffened with frost, a shawl thrown over her head like the merest serving wench, stood facing her. Behind her was Fadéi.

'What is it?' asked Raïssa.

The shawl was flung back, and Raïssa beheld her sister-in-law. The fair hair was almost dishevelled, the hollow blue eyes flashed forth a feverish fire, the face was pale and tear-bestained.

'I am Helen Marsof,' she said, taking a few steps towards Raïssa. 'I have done nothing to make myself beloved by you, but my son is dying; they tell me that you would not turn away a sick dog untended—have pity on an innocent child. Come.'

Raïssa looked at her and hesitated. All her rancour, all her anger, so profoundly stirred already, boiled at the sight of this woman. For six months they had lived close together, almost within sound of each other's voices, and the one had pretended to ignore the other's existence. And now, when she needed that other one's help, she came like this, sure of being heard. Was it insolence or respect that prompted the step?

'You refuse,' Madame Marsof went on, speaking very rapidly. 'I understand your reluctance; we have done you nothing but harm, but my son has done nothing to you. . . . Ah, you are not a mother, or you would already be gone.'

'I shall never be a mother,' replied Raïssa, setting her teeth firmly lest her anger should get the better of her. Her eyes travelled from Madame Marsof's face to that of the late Countess. At last she said, 'Let us go, let us go quickly.'

The words had scarcely left her lips when Fadéi threw a cloak across her shoulders. He knew the Countess better than she knew herself, for when he had seen Madame Marsof come in, and been told the reason of her call, he had caught up the garment, together with a shawl, and kept them in readiness over his arm.

'How did you come?' asked Raïssa.

'On foot; I ran all the way.'

'Very well; let us run then.'

They started through the scarcely trodden snow, accompanied by Fadéi, who had great difficulty in keeping up with them. They reached Helen's house before the clock had struck the half-hour.

Madame Marsof threw down her cloak in the anteroom; Raïssa did the same, and they flew up the staircase. On the first floor, in a cheerfully-furnished room, full of birds and flowers, beneath the soft light of a large lamp, lay little Alexander on his mother's bed, facing the portrait of his father. The lad was as white as a sheet, and was apparently dying. Convulsive shudders shook his delicate frame every now and then; he was foaming at the mouth. At intervals there was a piercing yell, then, after one or two efforts, he relapsed into torpor.

'What is the matter with him?' asked Raïssa of his mother, who, bending over the bedstead, tried to impart some warmth to the ice-cold hands of her child.

'I want you to tell me. He has been like this for the last two hours,' exclaimed Helen. 'No one knows what has happened to him.'

With a commanding gesture Raïssa bade the group of waiting-women who stood whining and wringing their hands be silent. Then she bent over the lad and carefully examined him. When her deft and sympathetic palm reached the abdominal regions, the little one shrieked with pain and made frantic efforts to vomit.

'He has been poisoned,' said Raïssa decisively. She only perceived the terrible import of her words when too late. 'He must have eaten something unknown to you,' she said in a gentler tone to Helen, 'and the matter was poisonous. Bring me all the milk you can find in the house. Quick.'

By dint of applying hot napkins, and an enormous quantity of milk she made him swallow, Raïssa succeeded in ridding the lad of what he had eaten. At the expiration of about an hour, he fell into a deep sleep on the arm of his mother, one hand clasped in hers, with the trace of suffering still plainly visible on his pretty face, but without pain and without shivering.

When his breathing became regular and soft, Madame Marsof gently withdrew her arm. He gave a grunt without waking up, and only clasped the hand he held tighter. Helen's other hand was held out to Raïssa.

'I owe you more than my life,' she said. 'How can I repay you?'

'You owe me nothing,' said Raïssa, in a reserved tone. It was an evil day for a reconciliation; she felt unable to take to her arms the sister of the man who had caused the death of her mother. 'You owe me nothing at all,' she repeated. 'You yourself have said it; I tend everyone that is ill without distinction.'

Helen dropped the hand she had caught in hers.

'You are implacable in your resentment,' she said; 'and still you have a generous heart.'

Raïssa shook her head.

'A generous heart!' she echoed. 'I don't know. There are fatal days in one's life. Pardon me, madame, and be assured that I wish you nothing but happiness.'

'I know it,' answered Helen. 'You showed Mavra Moroza the door.'

'You know that?'

'Yes, Fadéi told me.' And then, after a moment's hesitation, and with an irresistible impulse, 'You do not believe that——'

'No, I do not believe it.'

The hands of both women very fervently clasped, and their looks expressed implicit confidence.

'My brother does believe it,' said Helen sadly.

Raïssa kept silent.

'When was the child taken ill?' she said timidly.

'A little while after tea.'

'What did he eat?'

'Nothing; he was not hungry.'

'Had he had a good dinner?'

'As usual, we dined at four.'

'Could he have possibly got hold of some sweetstuff—something like they put down for the rats in my house?'

'No,' replied Helen, 'that is absolutely impossible. From the day of his birth, I have strictly forbidden such things to be used here, for fear of an accident.'

Raïssa fell into a deep thought.

'He has eaten a honey-cake,' she observed, after a few moments. 'Did you give him any?'

'No, they never enter the house. He is very fond of them, but honey does not agree with him.'

'One of your servants may have given it to him?'

Madame Marsof left the room to make inquiries.

During her absence Raïssa looked round the room. This cheerful and prettily furnished apartment, with the child's bed by the side of the mother's, the big portrait of the father, who died so young, and who was still so deeply mourned; the whole of this honest and peaceful interior testified in favour of Madame Marsof. The keys in every lock, the writing-table open to everyone's gaze, precluded all idea of mystery and crime.

'There have been no honey-cakes in the house to-day, nor for many days before,' said Helen when she returned.

'Are you very sure?'

'Absolutely.'

'Who has been here to-night?'

'No one. . . Mavra Moroza came to take my instructions.'

The same thought struck both women at once. They looked at one another, horror written in their faces.

'Never leave your child by himself,' said Raïssa, in French. Notwithstanding her employing a foreign language she had spoken very low, and drawn quite close to Helen.

Helen understood but too well, and answered with a sign.

'What interest can these people have in doing away with the child?' asked Raïssa.

'The estate would be divided. There might be a lawsuit about the extent of our land as compared with that of the Commune. They have already encroached considerably, and in that way annexed a large tract of forest. But apart from all that, their hatred of me suffices.'

'You believe that in order to harm you——?'

'For nothing else; and, besides, they could say once more that it is I.'

'Impossible!' said Raïssa. 'Do you believe they would do so?'

'They have dared other things. Wait till a week is over our heads and you'll see whether I was right.'

'But you should defend yourself,' shouted Raïssa, her indignation getting the better of her cautiousness.

'Who would defend me? My brother? He did not do so; perhaps he could not. I stand alone in the world against hostile peasants, people who hate me; and still, such as I am, deserted by everyone, I am still the only one to protect and defend this orphan.'

Helen's tears fell fast and scalding on the pillow where lay her son's head.

'Your husband killed himself, did he not?' said Raïssa, in a low tone.

'How do you know it?' said Helen, surprised, raising her beautiful blue eyes, generally so proud, but just now so gentle, to Raïssa's face.

'Seeing that you did not stir, you must have thought so,' said Raïssa, in a simple tone of voice.

'You alone have guessed my motives,' sighed Helen. 'No one else has thought of that.'

'It is because I am a woman who has suffered. But you must have had some proof.'

'I had one. I have destroyed it.'

Raïssa appeared to consider for a moment.

'It does not matter,' she said, after a while. 'I am not so certain that he did kill himself. Those who did not respect the child may have laid hands on the father.'

The eyes of Madame Marsof looked horror-stricken at Raïssa, and endeavoured to read her inmost thoughts.

'I shall find them out,' said the latter quietly, 'if I have to devote the whole of my life to the task. My life,

which is of no use to anyone,' she added, somewhat haughtily.

'Valerian will bless you,' murmured Helen.

'Count Gretzky hates me,' replied Raïssa, the recollection of all her troubles, for a moment put aside, crowding back upon her. 'It is very late, madame; allow me to say good-bye.'

'I'll order the carriage,' said Helen, going towards the door.

'Pray don't. Fadéi was to wait for me. He will be sufficient. I thank you all the same.'

Madame Marsof, surprised at the change in her sister-in-law's manners and tone, stood nonplussed, not knowing what to say. Raïssa had already reached the door, when better thoughts prevailed. Coming back to the bed, she bent over it and kissed the child's golden locks.

'God bless you, little one!' she said. Then, turning to the mother: 'Should he not be better to-morrow, madame, send for me, and I will come at once.'

'Thank you,' replied Madame Marsof. 'I'll say nothing more about my debt to you.'

Raïssa rewarded her with a sweet smile and a pleasant nod of the head. Then, seeing that Madame Marsof was about to see her out, she merely pointed to the child, and disappeared on the landing. In another moment Helen heard the door close, and from her window saw her run across the snow, followed by Fadéi, whose lantern, swinging to and fro, glimmered like a will-o'-the-wisp.

'What a strange creature!' thought Madame Marsof. 'She saved Alexander's life. Valerian must be told of this not later than to-morrow.'

When Raïssa got home, she went to the room where

Helen had found her. The lamp was still burning, casting a subdued glow on the portrait of Valerian's mother.

'Heaven only knows,' said Raïssa aloud, looking at the picture, 'whether I hate or love you all; but this *I do know*, that you try me cruelly.'

Nevertheless, that night Raïssa enjoyed a deep and refreshing sleep.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE first thing the little patient saw, when opening his eyes much later on that same day, was his mother's tearful face. Helen had grown uneasy at the boy's long sleep. A kiss and an affectionate smile sufficed to reassure her, and she hastened to give her son a cordial prepared by Raïssa's own hand previous to her departure. Then she called for some beef-tea, which was almost immediately brought in.

As the maid stood in the doorway with the steaming bowl on a silver tray, Helen noticed on the landing the smiling face of Mavra Moroza. A sudden and indefinable dread took possession of her. She rushed to the door and closed it, interposing, as it were mechanically, this feeble barrier between her child and the evil genius of her house. The maid had left the room; the bowl stood steaming on a small table close to the boy's bed; he stretched out his hand for it. His mother looked at him pensively, then rang the bell violently.

'Take away the beef-tea,' she said; 'there is something the matter with it. Bring me the *samovar* [urn] for the tea and new-laid eggs.'

The maid, with a look of surprise, did as she was told.

'Why mayn't I have this beef-tea, mother?' said the little lad, the tears starting to his eyes, for he felt hungry.

But the mother shook her head, and did not answer. However, in a few moments she said:

'You are going to have some eggs. I can at least be certain that there is nothing in them to hurt you. Tell me, darling, did Mavra Moroza give you a honey-cake last night?'

The child blushed, and turned his head away to hide his confusion. Helen repeated the question just as sweetly as before.

'Yes, she did, mother,' said at last the lad, who never told a falsehood.

'She warned you not to tell?'

'Yes, mother; you know how fond I am of honey, and you never will let me have any. She said you'd be vexed with me if you knew.'

'Well, you see now what your disobedience might have brought upon you. You might have died.' Saying which the widow clasped her child to her breast.

'Forgive me, mother; I shall never do it again.'

At this childish promise—so often repeated, so rarely kept—Helen could not help smiling. Finding that the expected reprimand had blown over, the boy became cheerful again, and chattered away for some time; and at last, fatigued by the violent shock of the previous night, put his head on his pillow happy and content.

The maid brought the boiling water and the eggs. Madame looked through the door that was left ajar, Mavra Moroza had disappeared.

At the advent of the servant the lad opened his eyes and watched with interest the preparations for his break-

fast. In a little while he settled cozily beneath the covers, and began to ply his mother with questions.

'Mother,' he said, 'I fancied that last night while I was ill I saw a lady standing by the bed. Was it a live lady or an angel?'

'It was a woman,' replied Madame Marsof.

'What woman?' persisted the boy. 'She is very beautiful. I never saw her before.'

Helen hesitated for a moment, then made up her mind to tell the truth.

'It's your aunt,' she said.

'A new aunt? What's her name?'

'Raïssa Gretzky.'

'Raïssa; it's a pretty name; it means "came from heaven," does it not, mother? She dropped from heaven, then, mother; you never spoke of her?'

'No, my dear,' said Helen, 'she did not drop from heaven; she is the wife of your Uncle Valerian.'

'Then she lives close by, mother? Why don't we go and see her?'

Madame Marsof did not answer. The child, used to those fits of silence, busied himself with his eggs; but when he had finished, his thoughts had simply accomplished a revolution which brought them back to the same point.

'She is very nice and kind, this aunt, isn't she, mother?' he said.

'Yes, she is very kind,' replied Madame Marsof.

'Then why don't we go and see her?'

'We will go one day,' said the mother, full of gratitude at the thought that this Raïssa had really dropped from heaven to save her child.

Nevertheless Madame Marsof's promise was not to be fulfilled. Mavra Moroza seemed to pass the whole of

her life in Helen Marsof's anteroom. It seemed as if the woman had nothing else to do than to watch her mistress. No matter at what hour, her smirking face was in Helen's path, and the latter no longer concealed the horror with which those treacherous features inspired her. She dared not let her little boy go out of her sight. Not only did he sleep, as always, in her room, but she followed him everywhere—along the corridors, in his play-room, in the small room where, as yet, he learned his simple lessons. She dared not let him taste food without having tasted it before; the very milk they brought him in the morning appeared suspect.

Such a life and the constant tension seemed almost tantamount to death, but it was her death, and she was determined to go on with it as long as she had strength left; she was certain that if she succumbed her son would not live a week.

After the child's illness Mavra had come to her with the same assurance, the same broad smile, as if nothing had happened. She had asked for particulars as if the idea of being suspected was utterly foreign to her. Helen, always on her guard, had reprimanded her for having given her son things that disagreed with him, and which she had already prohibited as having caused indigestion before. While she was speaking the eyes of the mistress were fixed on her dependent, trying to read the latter's inmost thoughts.

But Mavra had not the kind of absurd conscience that sends the blood to the cheeks of its owner at the least suspicion; she merely apologized in the humblest, but in the most unconcerned manner.

'Forgive me,' she said; 'I did not think I was doing any harm. The little master is deprived of many things he likes. The doctors among you forbid all these; they

are right, perhaps, seeing that the boy got ill over them; but the children among us all eat honey-cakes, and are none the worse for them.'

The simplicity, the plausibleness of the answer, left Madame Marsof no alternative but to accept the explanation, unless she was prepared to denounce Mavra to the authorities. What would have been the use of that? She preferred to wait. She wrote to her son's guardian. The latter was a fine gentleman about town, a friend of her late husband, but averse to work or trouble of any kind. He replied to Helen that if his presence was necessary, he would certainly come, but that he did not think it necessary to trouble Madame Marsof with his presence. The child had been ill; he was very sorry, and was glad to hear that he was better by now. The estate had yielded a little less than the previous years; but it was not surprising, seeing that the crops had been bad everywhere, except, perhaps, in their own part of the country, but he saw no reason to despair of the next crops. With these and many more stereotyped expressions of sympathy, the fine gentleman conveyed to Madame Marsof the assurance of his respectful homage, and promised her a brilliant success if she would make up her mind to come and spend the carnival at St. Petersburg, 'where, for the time being,' he said, 'we are utterly short of clever and sprightly women. There is no one but splendid and dazzling Princess Adine, and she carries everything before her.'

At the receipt of this letter Madame Marsof smiled bitterly. Her son had, indeed, a worthy and painstaking guardian. Then she wrote to her brother, whose answer did not reach her so quickly. She waited for three months, during which the snow gradually melted away. The rivers shook off their icy fetters, and a slight green

tint overspread the earth. It was the young grass that commenced to sprout forth.

The new grass is the only cheerful sight of early spring, nearly always chill and often forbidding in those parts, for the driving showers still lash the sky, scarcely visible from between the rain-clouds; the wind shrieks through the roofs and makes the windows rattle in their casements, it is still bitterly cold; but the smallest ray of yellow, dim sunshine is enough to accentuate this greenish tint, which is no longer a mere down, but has already become a carpet. The snow melts quicker and quicker, and the grass sprouts high and thick, where but a month since the soil lay seemingly dead in its white shroud.

It is at such times that the Russian peasant, shut up during the whole winter, feels stirring within him a kind of joyous expectation. He attributes it to his anticipation of the harvest which will be plentiful, perhaps, and make up for his former troubles and adversity. He is mistaken; the anticipation of the harvest only would not fill his heart and soul with the impatience of golden skies and warm weather. It is the month of April itself which stirs the poesy latent in any and every being not within a city pent; none, except he be surrounded by bare and cold stones, can escape the magic of spring.

It was not the expectation of harvest that caused Raïssa's heart to throb. For the last few weeks she had been expecting a letter from her husband, which would not, alas, be addressed to her, but to Fadéi, who had written to tell his master of the accident that had befallen Helen's son. The old servant had no motive for concealing his suspicions, consequently he had dilated on them at length between his sympathetic complaints. He had been particularly careful not to pass over in silence the service

rendered by Raïssa to his master's sister, and it was with a secret hope that at the end of his letter he had added:

'God's hand is plainly with the young woman, for since she has come here, everything prospers beyond our wishes.'

The reply came at last. Written in a moment of anger and despair it caused bitter tears to Fadéi, who felt inclined to keep it to himself.

'You are an old idiot with your hand of God,' wrote the master. 'The hand of God has come down heavily upon me. I cannot leave my place of banishment, while my place should be among you, to protect my sister and her son, given up defencelessly to a set of wicked brutes.'

Fadéi read and re-read the letter; he dared not show it to Raïssa. The latter, on her side, from the looks of her old *major-domo*, had understood but too well that it boded no good to her, and did not venture to ask. Hope, which had put the roses in her cheeks at the approach of spring, was dispelled, and left her still more despondent than before.

To pass her time and forget her troubles she devoted herself to charity more than ever. Now that the weather permitted she took daily excursions, mostly on foot, to her villages, in order to tend the sick. The latter did not hesitate to send for her. Their mistress's kindness had become to them as a matter of course, of which they did not scruple to take advantage.

One evening, in the beginning of May, she was coming back from one of her walks when she was accosted by a little girl of about ten:

'Grandfather is ill,' said the child; 'he wants thee.'

Raïssa followed the messenger, who took her to one of

the huts of the village, which was at a considerable distance from the manor, but in a lonely side street. The dwelling looked particularly sad, its occupant looked sadder. It was a tall, gaunt old man, with a surly mien and far from ingratiating ways. Acute rheumatism held him as it were riveted to his couch, a very primitive one, consisting of a mere wooden board and a sheep-skin. At the sight of Raïssa he inclined his head.

'Excuse me, mother, for not getting up to greet thee; can't get up.'

'There is no need for you to get up to greet me,' Raïssa said in a cheerful tone.

The poor tenement was suddenly lighted up by her graceful and kindly presence, and the old man himself appeared to be affected by it.

'I sent for thee,' he said, 'because I can't move. They tell me that thou knowest everything, that thou curest everybody. Cure me. I want to be up and doing. I must be up and doing.'

'You'll not be up and doing for some time to come, but your ailment is not dangerous. You must have patience, a great deal of patience, and my medicine will do the rest.'

'Shall I be able to walk before St. Peter's Day?' asked the old man.

'I don't think so.'

The old man shook his head sadly.

'It is necessary that I should, though. I have made a vow. I must undertake a pilgrimage to the Monastery of St. Sergius.'

'You'll go later on,' said Raïssa, to give him courage.

'Later on, later on,' growled the patient. 'Later on I'll be dead. I want to do penance, so thou must cure me, mother.'

'I'll do all I can,' said the young woman, smiling at her strange patient.

Then she told him what to do with the medicine she should send, and went out. From that day forward she often received visits from the barefooted little messenger, who came to fetch her when old Tikhone was alone, and felt bored with his own society.

At first she went thither from sheer charity, but all of a sudden she began to take particular interest in the old man's talk.

Tikhone had known Valerian's parents, and was able to tell Raïssa many stories about their lives, all of which interested her. In a little while she bethought herself of leading the conversation to the subject of the late M. Marsof, but her first attempt in that way was attended with such strange results as to cause her to seriously reflect before making another.

'Marsof!' said the old peasant, shaking from head to foot—'you mean the one who has died lately; may God rest his soul, poor man!' Then an acute twitch of rheumatism appeared to alter the train of his thoughts. 'I am in great pain, mother. Cure me as quickly as you can, so that I may do penance. Cure me, or else God will not receive me in His bosom, sinner that I am.'

In fact, Tikhone was very much worse after that for several days, so bad that Raïssa thought it was all over with him. Not knowing whether it was the mention of Marsof's name that had aggravated his complaint, or whether he had merely suffered an accidental relapse, Raïssa kept silent from prudential motives. Her patience was rewarded, for in about a week there was a visible improvement.

May was drawing to an end, the nightingale sang of an evening in the woods full of new leafage, when, to her

great surprise, Raïssa received a letter addressed to her personally in the handwriting of Valerian. Fadéi was all of a shake as he held it out to her on a silver tray, and she herself could not help changing colour as she beheld her name on the envelope. For a moment she sat staring at the circular patch of red sealing-wax with its monogram and crest. It was the impression of that very seal she had sent to her husband at her first visit to his apartments in St. Petersburg.

Fadéi had stolen away on tiptoe: Raïssa was alone, she looked at the portrait of the dead Countess. It seemed to her that the latter was kindly smiling at her. She broke the seal and took from the envelope a sheet of paper folded in two. Yes, it was her husband's handwriting. She brushed her hands across her eyes, dim with emotion, and read:

'MADAME,—My sister Helen writes to tell me of the interest you have shown in her son, and the really important service you have rendered her. In accordance with her expressed wish, I thank you for what you have done. Pray also to accept the assurance of my gratitude for the remittances you send me regularly, and of the care you take of the property belonging to you, the memories attached to which are so dear to me.

'VALERIAN GRETZKY.'

Was this all? The letter dropped from Raïssa's hands into her lap. Was this all—the stiffly polite, cold, haughty, almost bitter letter? Was this the reward of Raïssa's cares and troubles during the last fifteen months—fifteen months of trials often very painful; was this the reward for so much hidden love, for so many wasted tears? What, then, was the good of the sacrifice—to this man, absent and ungrateful—of her filial love,

swamped henceforth by ever-anxious tenderness, ardent craving, so ardent as to constantly impel her heart and soul towards that Siberian desert?

The young wife's tears fell unchecked on the sheet of paper slightly impregnated with the perfume of the very sachets she had sent among the linen of her husband. The portrait of her mother-in-law continued, nevertheless, to smile at her. Raïssa rose from her chair and went to the window.

The sun was disappearing behind the trees, as it had disappeared on the day of her arrival a twelvemonth ago, the flower-beds wafted the same scent of moist earth and spring flowers; Raïssa's sadness changed into melancholy.

Yes, a whole year had passed, and so little had been accomplished. If things went on at the same rate, how many years of silent devotion would it take to appease Valerian's anger? When should she know whether it was he or another, the recollection of whose outrage seared like a red-hot iron? When should she know whether it was his image that should be stamped on her memory or banished for ever as an object of disgrace and shame?

'Never, never,' repeated the young woman aloud; 'never; he has said it himself.'

Faddi had entered the room as softly as he had left it. He stood discreetly waiting near the door, asking for orders about the tea. Raïssa turned towards him, the traces of tears still on her face, her hand holding the sheet of paper.

'Then the master is no longer vexed with you, seeing he has written?' he asked, but so humbly as to preclude all idea of inquisitiveness.

'He is just as vexed as ever,' sighed Raïssa, 'though Heaven knows I wish him no harm.'

'If he has written to you it is a sign that he is no

longer angry,' Fadéi went on, with the same touching humility. 'The Gretzkys are like that; it is not obstinacy, but, if I may venture to say it, it is——'

The old man was evidently unable or afraid to use the right word. Raïssa came to his aid.

'It is pride,' she said.

Fadéi silently nodded his head, then went on:

'He must have been very pleased with what Madame Helen told him, to have written. He had not done so either for the money or the other things. . . .'

By this time Raïssa was eagerly following the words of the old servant.

'I am certain,' the latter continued, 'that he thanks you from his inmost heart, but before he can make up his mind to say what he thinks——'

Here he stopped short, and stood twirling his thumbs. He saw no way out of the difficulty without a somewhat severe criticism on his master's disposition; so he coolly took another tack.

'Never mind, madame, God is great, and life is long; but I am almost certain that the good times are coming back again. Have you heard that there is to be a marriage in the Imperial family?'

'Yes,' replied Raïssa, turning pale.

'Well, the gentlemen yonder, and the ladies also, are going to bestir themselves a bit. I have got an idea that our master will get a pardon.'

At the thought that Valerian might come back, Raïssa stood petrified with joy and terror alike. If he obtained his pardon he would, no doubt, curse her—her, the detested, the abhorred wife. But if, on the other hand, her patience and devotion had had the effect of disarming his anger, then Fadéi might be right; there might be good times in store.

The latter prospect was too much for her; the room would not hold her; she felt oppressed, and made straight for the garden, at the further end of which there was a delightful small plantation, with a wooden seat in its midst.

It had been raining during the evening; the white clusters of the wild cherry-trees that bordered the paths, bent down with moisture, drooped towards the soil, and kept dripping with a regular, gentle and musical drip. Two rival nightingales challenged one another, and in a little while Raïssa was utterly absorbed in dreams. She strolled about, the rain-drops falling on her majestic brow, taking deep draughts of the aroma wafted from the soil. Her grief was less than it had been. Nothing was lost. Not later than last year she was hated by all; to-day she had a friend in her sister-in-law, an ally in old Fadéi; Valerian had written to her. It was but a mere bit of politeness, truly; nevertheless, it was the first step in the way of correspondence. She could answer him if she liked. If she had but dared, how she would have answered him! Pacing up and down in the soft semi-darkness, peculiar to the gloaming of northern lands, she mentally concocted a letter to her husband.

'You hate me,' she was going to say; 'you hate me, and you are right, for I have done you all the harm a woman can do to a man, and still I have no wish but for your welfare. Since I received your nuptial ring, above all since I have lost my father, I think of no one but you. Your happiness is a thousand times more dear to me than my own. I have gradually lost all my own habits and tastes. I have learnt that which pleased you, and now my life is unconsciously modelled upon yours. The flowers you preferred are mine; the flower-beds are

arranged according to your former wishes; your dogs and horses love me as much as they loved you; your books are in their places. Think you it is an enemy who has thus fused her mind into yours? I am your wife, Valerian, and still I dare not think of you. I feel, nevertheless, that I am young; I know that I am good-looking, and I should have been happy elsewhere in a different sphere, if you had left me in obscurity. Why will not you tell me the one word that would decide my life? If I am to leave for ever this spot that is so full of you, and in which I should, as it were, have taken a position by usurpation, say the word, and I will go far, very far, so far that you will forget my very existence, my very name. I will go heart-broken, for if I had to go you should have told me, and then I should never have come. You have taken a cruel revenge; you have robbed me of my life's peace, the peace of silence and of death, which I still had the right to claim, of which I still had the right to dream. Cannot you see that in this troubled life in which you have assumed so large a place as to make me powerless to see anything except through your eyes; cannot you see that in this troubled life I am incapable of controlling my own mind, and my own heart? Cannot you feel that this devotion of the submissive dog is not the outcome of my reflections? Can it be possible that you have never asked yourself why I have thus given myself up body and soul to you and yours? And to sum up, Valerian, do not you feel, notwithstanding the thousands of miles and the abyss of shame that divide us—do not you feel that I love you?'

Raïssa had kept striding up and down, quicker and quicker, across the grass and along the flower-beds, composing the above letter, and when at last she stopped, frightened at the last words of it, which she had spoken

aloud, she felt that her dress was bedewed with moisture.

'It is the rain,' she said to herself; but she knew well enough that they were her tears.

And the letter which she had thus thought out was never written.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

NEXT morning Raïssa sent Valerian's letter to Madame Marsof, with the simple 'Thank you' written across it.

From a feeling of delicacy Helen returned her brother's letter after having read it. At the bottom she wrote: 'I am very glad.' These four words did Raïssa a great deal of good; they expressed her sister-in-law's opinion of her more eloquently than a long epistle could have done.

Raïssa was debating with herself whether she ought to go and see her nephew, when she got another visit from Madame Perscanof. The lady was the bellman and newsmonger of the district. The severe frosts and the subsequent thaws had prevented her from calling on the young Countess, but now that fine weather had set in she was likely to be as regular in her visits as the quarters of the moon.

After some desultory remarks and a cup of tea, the visitor broached the real object of her visit.

'Your sister-in-law is in a nice predicament,' she said.

'I do not understand.'

'You do not mean to say you don't know. Really, you are wonderful. To live next door to one another and not to know anything. Her son has been on the point of death.'

'I know that—indigestion.'

'Not at all; he had been poisoned.'

'Indeed!' said Raïssa, on her guard.

'Yes, poisoned—with mushrooms, probably, or something else that one can put in the food to make people believe in indigestion.'

'Is that what people say?' asked Raïssa, as if wanting to avoid the subject.

'It is very unfortunate for Madame Marsof,' the visitor went on. 'One really does not know whether to call upon her or not.'

'Because her child has been poisoned?' remarked her hostess quietly.

'Because her son's, after her husband's, would make too many sudden deaths,' replied Madame Perscanof mysteriously.

'If I understand rightly, then,' said Raïssa, 'people are of opinion that Madame Marsof has first of all poisoned her husband, and that she tried it afterwards upon her son?'

The visitor nodded her beribboned head assentingly.

'Then pray will you or the people explain by what mistake she missed her mark the second time, after having succeeded the first?' said Raïssa.

Somewhat surprised at this very quiet manner of saying aloud things so dangerous, and of which others only spoke in whispers, Madame Perscanof stammered:

'I do not know.'

'Perhaps you can tell me how it is that the child is not dead?'

'His strong constitution—perhaps——' said the lady, by no means glibly.

'What you do not appear to know, dear madame,' remarked Raïssa, with a smile, 'is that at the first symp-

tom of illness my sister-in-law sent for me. She knows that my father gave me a smattering of medical knowledge, which in fact has not been altogether useless in the case under consideration.'

'You were there, then?' asked Madame Perscanof, in great surprise.

'It is I who checked the attack of indigestion of my nephew with some sedatives, and the proof of it is that my husband has been good enough to thank me much more than was necessary for such a trifle.'

'So your husband has written to you?' said the visitor, dropping the first scent for a second and more promising one.

'This letter came last night,' replied Raïssa, pointing to the envelope that had been left on the writing-table.

The lady looked at the envelope. No doubt there was Raïssa's name plainly enough. Raïssa gave her the satisfaction of leaving the room for an instant to give some orders to the servant.

Madame Perscanof bounded towards the wrapper that promised so many things. Alack and alas! it was empty; but the scutcheon of the Gretzkys attested the truth of Raïssa's statement.

After that Madame Perscanof felt not inclined to prolong her visit.

She was not a clever woman, but sufficiently clever to know that further 'pumping,' as far as Raïssa was concerned, would be perfectly useless. She was furthermore anxious to retail the two bits of astonishing news she had managed to glean. Still, she attempted a last shot. When her hand was on the door she said:

'Then you are certain that Madame Marsof——'

'I am certain of one thing, apart from all moral considerations,' replied the young Countess, 'that when

one has sufficient audacity to poison some one, the poisoner is not sufficiently idiotic to go for help to his opposite neighbour. The most elementary cunning would prompt the prisoner to send to town for a doctor. During the delay the patient might die a dozen times.'

'That's perfectly just,' murmured Madame Perscanof; 'one cannot gainsay it.' When she had got into her carriage, she was so upset as to require more than ten minutes before she could put herself a question. 'Who, after all, could have poisoned the child? . . . It is all very well to talk about an attack of indigestion, but that would indeed be too simple a thing.'

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Two or three days went by, during which Raïssa made up her mind at least a score of times to write to her husband. Not that she intended to say aught to him of what she had concocted in the garden, but it seemed to her that, as a matter of politeness, his letter required a few words of reply. When she felt most sorely perplexed on the subject she received another visit from the little girl who generally acted as Tikhone's messenger.

'Grandfather is very bad,' said the child; 'he goes on anyhow, and shouts that he is going to die. He wants to speak to thee before he does die.'

Raïssa threw a lace shawl across her shoulders, and accompanied the short-skirted Iris.

Tikhone, worse tempered than ever, was in a high state of fever. Every now and then he uttered a moan. When he heard Raïssa's footsteps on the wooden path outside he turned his face towards the window. The movement enabled Raïssa to judge of the change for the

worse in the old man during the few days she had not seen him.

'You want to see me?' she said, drawing close to his bed.

Tikhone groaned twice or thrice and raised himself painfully on his elbow.

'Be off, you brat!' he shouted to his granddaughter, who was staring at him with all her might.

The little girl did not wait to be told twice; she scampered away, carefully latching the door.

'Go and shut the other door, that of the staircase,' said the old man, heaving a deep sigh.

There being no one in the room but Raïssa, she took the order as meant for her, and carefully locked both doors, opened the window to get some fresh air, and sat down by the old man.

'Shut the window,' growled the latter surlily. 'What I have to tell thee is for thine ear only.'

Raïssa did as she was told, then seated herself once more on the wooden stool.

'Listen,' began the old man, after having heaved a deep sigh. 'I must tell thee something. I have a sin on my conscience.'

Somewhat troubled at this ominous beginning, Raïssa vaguely looked round the room. Tikhone appeared to understand her fears.

'Don't be afraid,' he said; 'I respect thee, and will not harm thee; but thou must hear my confession.'

'Why not the priest?' asked the young woman, frightened at assuming such a responsibility.

But Tikhone merely shrugged his shoulders.

'The priest is all very well,' he said. 'We'll have him to say the last prayers, but what I have to say must be told to thee. Innocent people have already suffered long

enough. They say that the lady, thy sister-in-law, has killed her husband. That's what people say, don't they?'

Raïssa bent over the sick man, eager to drink in every word that fell from his lips.

'Those who have said that the lady is guilty,' Tikhone went on with suppressed rage, 'have told a lie, and the wretches know it; yes, they know it but too well.' Here he stopped, trying to catch his breath, and looked at Raïssa, then resumed: 'I am going to tell thee what did happen. It was in the middle of the winter, and so cold that the wolves came to the village to eat our dogs, and sometimes our children when they could get hold of them. We had divided the logs for the fire, but somehow my stock of them was spent, and the winter was not finished by a long while. Then the thought struck me that there was a great deal of wood wasted without anyone being the better for it; in the forest that runs along the Moscow road a great many trees had fallen down—a great many, as I knew well, for I had been looking at them many and many a time. The steward whom thou didst dismiss was very hard upon us. Of course, when there was any thieving to be done he wanted to have the game all to himself, and when he saw the chance of catching us he was only too glad. Then, one evening when I knew that he had gone to town to enjoy himself, I put my little horse to the sledge to pick the wood that lay rotting there without benefiting the poor people.'

The old man stopped from sheer fatigue. His attempt to breathe shook his attenuated frame.

'Just rest a bit,' said Raïssa gently.

Tikhone only shook his head.

'I had better not waste time,' he said. 'I was telling thee that I put the horse to the sledge, and when I got to the forest I set to work at once. I thought that while

I was about it I might just as well take as much as I could; and I did. I had a heavy load, but it was hard work, for I was in the snow up to my knees almost, and I felt every now and then so bitterly cold as to fear that my hands and feet were getting frost-bitten. Still, the rest of my body felt warm enough, for I was working, so to speak, to save my life. When I had as much as my horse would carry, I ran as far as the road to see whether I could get out without being seen. I was not afraid of the steward only; there were other enemies about.'

'Who were they?' asked Raïssa, being certain of the reply beforehand.

'The Morozas,' came the answer; 'the Morozas who had agreed with thy steward to make the masters believe that the harvest was a bad one, and that the crops fetched nothing. Just when I was going back to fetch the horse which I had left in the thick of the forest, I heard footsteps. The boots made a crunching noise on the hard snow, and I thought to myself that if it were merely a peasant I had better give him a few logs rather than remain there and be frozen to death. But it was not a peasant; it was the devil himself, or what comes to the same—Ivan Moroza. "What does he want here," I asked myself, "unless he comes upon an errand like mine? No Christian would be about in such weather." He was stepping along very slowly, like a man waiting for something, and at last he went into the forest itself, luckily at the opposite side to mine, for if he had come close to me I do not know what I might have done. I had a knife, and I was being driven mad with the cold that made my ears tingle; I might have had a greater sin still on my conscience.

'For a moment or so I stood stock-still, and then I heard the sound of horses' hoofs. "Someone else coming,"

I thought to myself. "They seem to have made appointments all round." The sound of the horses' hoofs was getting near, and Moroza stepped out into the road, making signals to someone I could not see then. I did when the sledge stopped a minute afterwards, opposite to where I was hidden. I shook with fear, for I thought it was the police of the district that was on my track.

'Would to Heaven it had been!' exclaimed the old man sadly. 'Would to Heaven it had been! I should not have suffered so long, nor passed such terrible nights.'

He asked for something to drink; Raïssa gave him some lukewarm tea; he moistened his lips and went on immediately:

'Dost thou know who was covered up in the sledge? It was thy brother-in-law, Nicholas Marsof.'

Raïssa could scarcely repress a cry of surprise, but by a supreme effort she managed not to interrupt the old man's narrative.

'It was Marsof,' Tikhone went on, 'but he slept as one sleeps that wakes no more. Nevertheless he was alive, for he snored, which astonished me. The night was so clear and still that I saw everything as if it had been daylight. The moon was standing right above the road. I dared not stir, for one could hear the rustle of the falling branches in the forest. Thou mayest judge whether I could stretch my legs. I had but one fear, that my horse might be whinnying in sniffing the others; but the poor brute was stupefied with cold. Then Moroza stopped up to the sledge. It was Vasili who was driving. Thou dost not know Vasili?'

'No,' said Raïssa.

'He is coachman at Madame Perscanof's; he had his freedom given to him. The old lord, the father of the one about whom I am telling thee, was too fond of giving

his serfs their freedom. He spoilt them, and did his son no good by it. But to come back to my story. Almost before the sledge stopped Moroza drew up to it and looked inside. "He went into our house, didn't he?" he asked Vasili. The coachman said "Yes." "It's my wife that asked him in?" "Yes," replied Vasili once more; "she stopped him as the sledge was passing your door, and invited him to drink the cup of coffee she had made for him to keep the cold out." "And he did go in?" asked Moroza, laughing. "Yes, he did go in," answered Vasili. Thereupon Moroza drew a long knife from his belt, and said to Vasili: "If you will help me there'll be a hundred roubles for you, and if you will not I'll stick you as I would a calf." Vasili began to shout, but it was of no use, because the master did not stir; he lay there like a log of wood.

'"You may shout as long as you like," said Moroza. "He won't hear you; he has taken the coffee, and it has sent him to sleep." I couldn't hear very well, and I was so cold that I thought I was going to die. Then Moroza began to talk to Vasili, and they stood talking to one another for a long while. In the end they took the master, the one by his feet, the other under his arms, and carried him to the coppice on the other side of the road. They seated him on a fallen tree. The master himself could resist no more than a child, for he was perfectly unconscious. They left him his fur coat, but they took care to open it.'

'You did not cry out?' said Raïssa, sick with horror. 'You did not try to defend him?'

'What would have been the good? They were two, I was alone, for the master was as good as dead. That is my sin; may God forgive me for it! But listen. They left the master there for an hour or so, perhaps, I do not

know. While they carried him along, I took advantage of the sound of their footsteps on the snow to get back to my horse. I told thee that the night was very still; I could hear everything. After awhile, after an hour, perhaps two, for I can't say, when I thought they were gone, I crept along to see whether the coast was clear, when I suddenly heard the voice of Ivan Moroza. He was speaking very quietly. "Like that," he said, "no one will have any fault to find. He was wrong to go to sleep; when one goes to sleep in such a cold, it is to wake no more." They had put the master back in the sledge. They had wrapped him in his nice furs—but he snored no longer. He was dead—frozen to death; may God rest his soul! They found him dead, when they looked into the sledge, when he got to town. He had been dead long before that.'

'Then he was dead before he got to town?' sai Raïssa, shaking from head to foot.

'I tell thee,' snorted Tikhone impatiently, 'that he was dead before he had left his own grounds. There was something else besides poppy in Mavra's coffee. At any rate, the coffee sent him to sleep with a vengeance.'

'It is Moroza and his wife who committed the crime, and it is they who slander the innocent widow.'

'Moroza killed his own brother, I take God to witness,' said the old man, crossing himself in order to emphasize his assertion.

'And you did nothing at all?' exclaimed Raïssa, horror-stricken. 'You did not denounce the murderers; you allowed an innocent woman, an unhappy widow, to be accused?'

'First of all,' explained Tikhone in a sullen tone, 'when I came home with my sledge full of wood, I found that my legs were absolutely benumbed, and both my feet

frost-bitten. My wife had all her work to do to nurse me, and for some time I thought that I would never get the use of them again. It is from that moment that I became ill. But even if I had spoken, dost thou think that the authorities would have listened to a poor devil like me? The only upshot of it would have been that I should have been found murdered one day in the wood, or in some out-of-the-way spot. Moroza would have done for me what he threatened to do for Vasili. He would have made no more to-do about it with one than with the other.' Raïssa and the old man kept silent for a moment, then the latter went on: 'This, mistress, is my sin, to have kept silent about it, and I did not want to die without having told someone about it. Now the priest may come as soon as he likes.'

'Why have you told this to me—to me?' repeated Raïssa. 'I am not a priest; I have no power of heaven to pardon you.'

'Thou,' said Tikhone, 'thou art a good woman, and thou dost good to everyone. When I am dead thou mayst say what thou willst.'

Thereupon the old man turned his face to the wall and seemed to doze off. Raïssa left the cabin on tiptoe.

As she came out of Tikhone's cabin, the light of day almost blinded her, the summer air intoxicated her; after the stifling atmosphere of the low-roofed hut, after the astounding story of a crime so boldly conceived, so skilfully carried out, the young woman had great difficulty in taking up the thread of everyday life; the whole seemed a terrible nightmare to her.

As she was strolling towards her own home she perceived in the distance, across the fields, Helen and her little son, who were returning from a somewhat long walk. Now and then, in the daytime, Madame Marsof

ventured to leave the confines of her own garden, in order to give her son more bracing air; but she always went back before dusk, because she felt that her enemies would stick at nothing.

Raïssa, still upset by all she had just heard, started running along the road and across the fields, and managed to come up with her sister-in-law before she had reached the gates of her garden.

At the sound of a voice calling her by her Christian name, Madame Marsof had stopped. At first she did not recognise Raïssa, who was advancing towards her with a rapidity not usual with ladies in Russian society. When she did recognise her she could not help smiling; this anxiety to speak to her seemed very pleasant to her after so many months of solitude and desertion. Had she who thus came after her been her cruellest foe, etiquette would have demanded an acknowledgment of such cordiality. But the sight of Raïssa produced a flush of genuine pleasure.

The latter, panting for breath, stopped in front of her sister-in-law, who held out her hand frankly; Raïssa placed hers in it.

'Mother,' said Alexander all of a sudden, 'this is the aunt who came when I was ill.'

'Then you do remember me?' said Raïssa in a gladsome voice.

'Yes, I do,' said the boy; 'you are such a nice aunt, and you took care of me when I was ill.' Then he took her hand, and, with courtesy almost comical in one so young, kissed it.

Helen was smiling all the while. Raïssa stooped down and put her lips to her nephew's forehead, thinking at the same time how very delicate and pale it looked. Then, turning to Helen,

'I have heard great news,' she said; 'and I hope that in a little while you'll stand as clearly justified in everyone's eyes as you already stand in mine.'

Madame Marsof turned pale, and leant against the gate.

'You have been told of something,' she whispered.

'I know everything; the spot; the names. I have one witness: I shall have another one.' She stopped, for her sister-in-law could scarcely stand. Her pallor increased.

'Keep up your spirits, and trust in me,' said Raïssa, stooping down once more to kiss the boy, who stared at her in surprise not unmixed with fright.

'What can you do?' feebly asked Helen.

'One can do everything when one is firmly resolved; when one has right on one's side,' replied Raïssa excitedly. 'I have sworn to devote my life to this cause——'

The eyes of the two women met, and a slight flush overspread Helen's features.

'If you get me out of this trouble,' she said with a sigh, 'my brother would be——'

Raïssa blushed and quickly hung down her head. The little boy had drawn close to her, he took the pretty, well-shaped hand and began to stroke it.

'The child does not get enough air,' she said, in order to change the conversation.

Helen shook her head sadly.

'It is not my fault,' she sighed. 'I am so frightened.' At the same moment a tall and lean female form appeared in the distance. 'There, judge for yourself,' said Helen, directing her glances to it. 'I am being followed, watched!'

'Are you sure it is you they are watching?' asked Raïssa; 'may it not be I?'

'You, no; you are the envoy of the Czar; you are sacred to them. Have you not already noticed how they respect you here?'

There was a touch of bitterness in the tone in which these words were spoken. Raïssa was too sensible to notice it.

'You had a coachman by the name of Vasili?' she said, to change the subject.

'Yes, it was he who drove my husband——'

'Don't express any surprise if you hear that he has come back to the neighbourhood. I intend to take him into my service.'

Helen was about to inquire; a movement of Raïssa cut her short.

'Good-bye,' she said, 'and go home.'

They shook hands once more; Raïssa kissed the child, and the two women parted company. Raïssa had not gone a dozen steps when she perceived Mavra with her unchanging crafty smile and honeyed look.

'Good-evening, madame,' said the woman.

Raïssa, too indignant to answer, merely nodded, and hurried on. Mavra stood stock-still in the road, and watched her retreating in the distance.

'What a pity,' she muttered to herself, 'what a pity we daren't touch this one!' But the smile never left her face.

CHAPTER XXXV.

In less than a week after these events Madame Perscanof experienced one of the greatest sensations of her life. The Gretzky carriage, drawn by four magnificent black horses, stopped before her door, and Raïssa, Raïssa

herself, alighted from it. So great, indeed, was the surprise that Madame Perscanof had scarcely recovered when Raïssa, this time dressed in half mourning, entered the room and held out her hand.

'You see, madame, I have availed myself of your invitation and ventured far from home,' she said.

In fact, a visit from Raïssa had up till now been a favour more often requested than granted. This humble daughter of a penniless army surgeon had succeeded in assuming in the province the supremacy due to her indifference to public opinion. If the young woman whom fate had made Countess Gretzky had solicited the goodwill of the province, there is little doubt that she would have seen every door closed to her. She had, on the contrary, 'walled in her life,' and from that moment people vied with one another to scale that wall.

'Delighted—delighted, I am sure,' repeated Madame Perscanof, taking stock of her visitor with a look of ecstasy. For was it not happiness, indeed, to be able to tell everyone that the young Countess had called on her?

Raïssa, on her side, was all smiles and amiable to a degree. This 'nobody,' whom provincial society had meant to ostracise, condescended to take a modest snack; she allowed her dress, her bonnet, her ribbons, to be admired; she was even kind enough to promise Madame Perscanof the pattern of a bodice, which would make her appear twice as slight.

'One good turn deserves another,' said her hostess. 'I should like to do something to please you.'

'If I were to take you at your word?' said Raïssa, with her most winning smile.

'I should only be too delighted.'

'I may have the opportunity before long,' laughed Raïssa, determined to keep the ball rolling.

After the light refection, the ladies talked about their horses, and went to see the stables. The grooms showed off their cattle, and Raïssa was obliged to listen to an account of their (the animals') prowess. While Madame Perscanof was chattering away, Raïssa carefully examined everything and everybody around her. One of the coachmen, short thick-set, hirsute, scarcely repaid the trouble; there was nothing startling about him. The other, much younger, had a kind of savage look like that of a man with a grievance against his fellow-creatures, perhaps against himself. It was the latter that attracted Raïssa's notice.

'What is that man's name?' she asked, while he was showing off a very fine stepper.

'Vasili. He is one of your sister-in-law's former serfs. Your late brother-in-law gave him his freedom.'

'How long has he been with you?'

'About eighteen months. . . . He is a very good coachman, but he has a nasty temper. His fellow-servants do not like him, and, to tell you the truth, I myself prefer Gregory.'

'I have been told that he knows the country very well,' said Raïssa, who had made her inquiries beforehand. 'He seems to have been everywhere, and he is familiar with every nook and corner. I am sorry he is with you. My coachman comes from St. Petersburg, whither he went when very young. He often loses his way when he has to take me far. If Vasili had been with anyone else but with you, I should not have scrupled to take him away, but with you it's a matter of conscience.'

'Not in the least,' exclaimed Madame Perscanof. And there and then she called out to the man, 'Vasili, will you go over to the Countess? She thinks she would like to engage you?'

Vasili looked at Raïssa, whose face showed the most complete indifference.

'The fact is that I do not like this part of the country much,' he said in a surly tone.

'He has been crossed in love, perhaps,' said Madame Perscanof in French. She felt persuaded that she had made a clever discovery.

'And I, on the contrary, should very much like to know it,' said Raïssa unconcernedly. 'If you care to drive me, you shall have twenty silver roubles a month.'

'My dear,' exclaimed the hostess, 'the country will become unbearable if you give your people such wages.'

'It's a whim of mine,' replied Raïssa; 'everyone has a fancy now and then.'

Vasili was fond of money; he was evidently tempted by the high pay. Besides, there is an axiom to the effect that every criminal returns sooner or later to the spot of his crime, and the axiom is not devoid of foundation. For many months Vasili had unconsciously struggled with the desire to revisit the fatal spot, to behold again the witnesses to a past which he vainly endeavoured to blot from his memory. After a moment's hesitation, he replied:

'With madame's permission I will accept your offer.'

'You have my leave,' said the hostess with alacrity.

'Now we are quits,' laughed Raïssa, as she made her way back to the drawing-room. 'You borrow the pattern of a bodice, I borrow your coachman.'

'Say rather that you take him off my hands,' concluded Madame Perscanof. 'I disliked his face above all things.'

Vasili went back that same evening with Raïssa, who for once in a way departed from her usual habits, and stayed to dinner. The very next day the new coachman

began his duties, and, to the great mortification of the Countess's servants, it was henceforth he—an intruder—who had the privilege of driving her about.

There was, however, someone still more mortified than Raïssa's servants. It was Madame Perscanof, for never did the young woman darken her doors again.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

For full a fortnight Raïssa, with her new coachman, scoured the country. The weather was magnificent; the golden corn waved gladly 'neath the summer sun. It was perfect rapture to the young woman to be dashing along the smooth roads to the accompaniment of the rhythmic gallop of a perfectly appointed turn-out.

Vasili, who had been somewhat uneasy at first, gradually settled down. He did not go and see his former fellow-servants; it looked as if he had never had anything in common with the Marsof establishment. Once, and once only, he was taken unawares. As he was returning from watering his horses in the river, he ran against Ivan Moroza. The latter was not in the least taken aback; on the contrary, there was a knowing smile on his face. Moroza was a well-knit, vigorous fellow, about the middle height, with a reddish beard and deep-set eyes, so deep-set that they seemed small. His glance, shifting, inquisitive, appeared to wander from one object to another—a capital pretext for avoiding those glances that sought his.

'Well, brother, so you have come back among us,' sticking himself in the middle of the road, his arms hanging listlessly by his side.

'Yes,' growled Vasili. 'I could have done without.'

'You are not so badly placed; you have got a mistress rich and amiable. You should be very careful when driving her about lest you should upset her. You have been unlucky now and then.'

'May God's anger blast you!' hissed Vasili, brutally driving his horses into the road at the risk of seeing Moroza trampled beneath their hoofs.

This was their only interview. Helen's steward held no further parley with Vasili, who was his victim rather than his accomplice. He had merely wanted to prove to him that he was not afraid of his 'peaching.'

It has already been said that Vasili was fond of money, but by no means bad at heart. He had left the neighbourhood before public opinion accused Madame Marsof, and since then taken little notice of what people said. But when he really became aware, from overhearing the gossip, how fatal the crime had been to the widow, when he heard that the child had been on the point of joining his father, he became possessed of a feeling near akin to remorse, if it was not remorse itself.

Raïssa, without appearing to attach any importance to them, carefully studied every cloud, every frown on his countenance—not very prepossessing at any time.

She, as it were, espied the secret workings of a conscience in the inmost recesses of a benighted soul.

One day she arranged to drive past the garden of her sister-in-law at the hour when the latter was out for a stroll. They merely exchanged a look and a smile. That day Vasili, who had taken off his cap to his former mistress, refused to eat his supper, and went to sulk in one of the outhouses.

A month had elapsed. As the weather grew finer, old Tikhon recovered his strength; his rheumatism had

almost entirely left him, or, rather, had settled in his legs.

'I want to go and do penance at St. Sergius,' he often said to Raïssa; but his feet appeared in no way disposed to carry him that far.

'Listen,' said his protectress to him one day; 'seeing that you are bent, that you have taken a vow, to go to St. Sergius, and that you cannot go on foot, I will send you thither in a carriage, but on one condition.'

'Oh, my benefactress! Oh, mother!' exclaimed the old man, beside himself with joy. 'Name any condition thou willst. Command, and I will obey thee like a dog; but let me accomplish my vow, so that God may no longer be angry with me.'

'Very well, you shall do as I tell you. On that condition only shall you accomplish your pilgrimage. First of all, you must come and live at my house.'

'Why?' asked Tikhone, with evident dislike. 'I am well enough here.'

'You cannot be cured here,' replied Raïssa in a tone of authority. 'Besides, you promised to obey me; and you are already going back from your word.'

'Do what thou willst with me,' sighed the old man submissively.

Life turned out more pleasant than he expected. He had been afraid of the large, airy and bright rooms, in which the peasant, accustomed to his dark, low-roofed cabin, feels himself out of place. Raïssa sent him to one of the rooms in the servants' quarters—a room where the ceiling was as low as he could possibly wish, but which was clean and healthy.

The children of the servants were always at play in the yard, and their cheery voices amused the old man; the watchdogs ran in and out to see him, pushing against

the door to effect an entrance, and jumping out of the window when their visit came to an end. All this stir and bustle prevented time from hanging heavily on Tikhone's hands; besides, he had his daily ray of sunshine when Raïssa came to see him for a quarter of an hour.

'Thou hast promised to cure me first, and to send me afterwards to St. Sergius,' he said to her each morning.

'I mean to do both,' she replied, one morning when she found him more tractable than usual; 'but you, on your side, have promised to blindly obey me. I am going to ask you something.'

'Speak,' said the old man submissively.

'You know Vasili is here?'

'I have seen him,' said Tikhone very humbly.

'He is coming here. You must tell him what you have told me.'

'No, no!' yelled the poor wretch, beside himself with fear. 'Anything but that, my good benefactress. Ask anything but that.'

'That is what you have to do, and not anything else.'

'I shall not speak,' said Tikhone, with a determined look, pulling the counterpane over his swollen limbs.

'You are free to do as you like,' remarked Raïssa, very quietly; 'but, in that case, you shall not go to St. Sergius, and you will die without God having pardoned you. Not only will the sin you have committed remain on your conscience, but when He shall ask you why you did not fulfil your vow of doing penance, you can answer Him that you did not want to go.'

The young woman had struck the right chord. This mixture of religion and superstition, this familiar exposition of simple faith, was the very thing to move the simple soul of old Tikhone.

The struggle was, nevertheless, a long one—so long, that Raïssa's courage failed her more than once. The struggle with the physical forces of nature does not require half the energy necessary to the struggle with 'shilly-shallying' ignorance, with a benighted conscience that shuns the light. It requires less time to divert the current of a stream than to bring home the truth to one who profits by its denial.

Conquered in the end by her positive refusal to send him to St. Sergius if he persisted in keeping silent, Tikhone consented to answer if he was interrogated, and to tell the truth unreservedly.

When Raïssa had carried her point, she determined to benefit by it as quickly as possible. Tikhone might change his mind at any moment, and she would have to start afresh. The very next day she laid her plans. Vasili was to come and fetch her at Tikhone's room.

Vasili did not know the old man personally. He had never noticed him among the many serfs. He therefore entered the bright, small room without the slightest misgiving. The window, contrary to custom, was closed on that day. He carried a bundle of letters, for he had been to the post-office, and presented them to his mistress.

'Put them on the table,' said Raïssa.

The coachman did as he was told, and crossed the small room to reach the table at the other end.

Raïssa, meanwhile, had got between the door and himself, so that when he turned he found his egress barred.

Etiquette forbids servants to remain in their masters' presence unless it is to wait upon them. Hence Vasili stood before Raïssa, cap in hand, awaiting her orders.

'Is it true, Vasili,' began Raïssa, 'that you were in my brother-in-law's service when he died?'

A deadly pallor overspread the man's features. He glanced at the door, then at the window, and at last, pretending to cough in order to disguise the sudden change in his voice, which had become hoarse with emotion, he said:

'Yes, madame, it is true.'

'I have been told it was you who drove him the day of his death.'

Raïssa spoke in so calm a voice that the coachman plucked up courage. He was under the impression that he was merely satisfying a woman's idle curiosity.

'That also is true, madame,' he said.

'When did you find out that your master was dead?' asked Raïssa, without looking at him. She was playing with the tassels of her sunshade, and did not appear very concerned.

'I found it out when everybody else did,' replied Vasili in a more assured tone; 'when we reached the town-house, and they called the master to get out.'

'Oh, you found it out only then. Did not your master speak to you on the road?' said Raïssa.

'He never spoke to us on the road,' murmured Vasili; 'besides it was so cold.'

'How long did the journey take?'

Vasili looked more carefully at Raïssa, who did not move a muscle. A vague terror took possession of him; he began to tremble.

'I did not notice,' he stammered.

'At what time did you start?'

'At six in the evening.'

'And you got there——'

'At half-past ten.'

'Then it took you four hours and a half to do twenty-five versts.'

Raïssa left off playing with her sunshade. She was endeavouring to intercept Vasili's glances.

'The master stopped at Ivan Moroza's house,' said Vasili, catching at the feeble pretext.

A deep silence fell upon the small room. One could have heard the ticking of Raïssa's watch.

'You stopped nowhere else?' she asked.

'No, madame,' said the coachman, hanging down his head.

Tikhone lay listening in silence; his face had grown ghastly white at the thought of what his mistress might require of him in another minute. For a moment or so neither of them spoke, then Raïssa's voice rang out firmly through the room:

'This old man,' she said, pointing to Tikhone, 'avers to having seen you in the wood at the hour of seven on the same day, and you were talking to Ivan Moroza.'

Vasili all at once stood like a stag at bay. His eyes sought those of Raïssa, but he lowered them beneath the searching look of the young woman. He knew she was not afraid of him.

'Who has dared to say it?' he gasped. 'Is it you, old man? Have you no fear of Heaven's justice that you dare lie like that at your age, and with one foot in the grave?'

'Have done with your blasphemy; don't invoke Heaven's justice!' thundered Tikhone, his strength appearing suddenly to have returned. 'I was in the forest when you took your master out of the sledge; I was there when you put him back again. I know everything.'

Vasili raised his head proudly.

'If you know everything, you also know who sent the master asleep, and the one who tempted me.'

'He has told the truth,' said Tikhone, holding out his

hand to Vasili. 'It is not he who planned and prepared the crime. Let him say what happened, mistress, and then thou'lt see whether he or I lied.'

Raïssa turned to the coachman. Heaven only knows what the man read in her face, but he pulled himself together, and no longer seemed to bear the burden of shame and terror that was crushing him a moment before.

'The wife of Ivan Moroza,' he said, slowly and deliberately, 'had sent the master asleep with something —a potion or a charm—I do not know what. I was not aware of it, and was driving across the forest when I beheld Ivan Moroza. Is it true, old man?'

'It is true,' affirmed Tikhone, with a nod of the head. 'Go on.'

'He made me stop my horses, and ordered me to take the master, and to lay him down in the cold frost in order that he might sleep for ever. I refused; then he threatened to kill me.'

'Go on,' repeated Tikhone, with the same shake of the head.

'What could I do?' said Vasili. 'Die also?' What good would that have been to anyone? I simply obeyed one stronger than myself. The master went to sleep without pain, and no one would have been the wiser but for this accursed old man. And now say what you were doing in the forest in a frost in which no Christian would have ventured out, unless he was driven to it by the evil one himself?'

'I was stealing wood,' quietly replied Tikhone.

'Mistress,' said Vasili, 'do with me what you will; but it would be a crying iniquity if Ivan Moroza were not punished by justice also. Without him I should be innocent of all this.'

'Why did you accept blood-money?' Raïssa's voice sounded clear and bell-like through the room.

Vasili hung down his head once more. He had no answer to that question.

'Your greed has been your curse,' the young woman went on. 'You also,' turning to Tikhone, 'you have been bodily struck for having coveted what was not yours. Your flesh has been chastised. But he,' pointing to Vasili, 'is more wretched than you, for his soul suffers, and there is no cure for that.'

A deep silence fell upon the low-ceilinged room after that. Outside the mid-day sun was glinting on the golden sand of the yard; the children played, the stir and bustle of the farm filled the air. Raïssa felt as if she were about to choke. She ran to the window and opened it—the room became flooded with life and light.

'Listen,' said Raïssa to the two men who were looking at her in consternation: 'I hold your lives in my hands. Not only have you killed a man who never did you any harm, who never did harm to anyone, but you have been the cause of his widow being suspected; you are the cause of her friends and family having held aloof from her; you are the cause of her soul being weighed down with grief. If you wish to be reconciled to your Maker you must have the courage of confessing your crime before the world when I order you to do so.'

'We shall be sent to Siberia,' said Vasili gloomily.

Raïssa shook her head.

'I will get both of you pardoned if you will confess, I promise you, and I will provide for you in such a way as to enable you to burn as many tapers before the sacred images as you like. You shall have the Czar's pardon on earth, and that of God in heaven.'

It was not without premeditation that Raïssa had

invoked the Czar's name. She knew that these poor benighted souls looked upon her as directly sent by the Emperor, as a kind of all-powerful ambassadress, whom no one dared to resist.

'Do what seems good unto you. Since that dreadful night I have been an altered man; a miserable wretch not daring to think of anything. If you could but know how many sleepless nights I spent. Perhaps, now, I shall be able to sleep again.'

'The peace of the Lord is upon those who repent,' said Raïssa. 'Go, and endeavour to serve me faithfully.'

Vasili bent down to the ground, and left the room.

'When shalt thou take me to St. Sergius?' asked Tikhone of his benefactress.

'Don't be in such a hurry,' replied Raïssa. 'Wait! The end has not come yet.'

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Vasili strolled down to the bank of the river to ponder the consequences of his avowal. In reality he felt much relieved in his mind. The crime had weighed heavily on him, all the heavier, perhaps, because it had not been conceived from personal greed, nor executed out of revenge—two incentives sufficiently powerful at times to stifle conscience with the ignorant. Vasili felt well enough that henceforth his existence solely depended on Raïssa; but, curious to relate, he in no way wished her dead, or even removed from his path. This young woman seemed to him endowed with a supernatural force, and a vague feeling of terror mingled with his respect for her. In addition to this, the name of the Czar, so skilfully

and opportunely invoked by Raïssa, furthermore tended to convince the guilty man that he was absolutely at the mercy of his young mistress, who had become the arbiter of his liberty, of his life.

While he was conning these things in his obtuse peasant's mind, he beheld at a distance Ivan Moroza, who was returning from town with provisions. Vasili turned away in order to avoid him, but he took the high-road, and ten minutes afterwards, to his great surprise, he saw Moroza coming up with him. The crafty steward was perched on one of the sides of the conveyance; he had merely taken a short cut.

'Since when do you avoid your friends?' asked Moroza, with a provoking smile.

Vasili had intended not to answer him, but the smile put him in a rage.

'You are not one of my friends,' he growled; 'so you go your way and I'll go mine.'

'Is it since you are made so much of by the Countess that you have become so proud?' asked Moroza, jeering.

Vasili simply shrugged his shoulders and turned his back on him.

'Well, we have heard of noblemen in love with peasant girls before now,' continued Moroza, flicking his horse to make it keep pace with Vasili, who was striding along as fast as he could. 'We have heard of noblemen in love with peasant girls; I don't see the harm of a countess being in love with a coachman.'

Vasili turned round, and spat on the ground in token of contempt.

'You serpent's tongue—you devil!' he said in a tone of disgust. 'You must needs dribble your slime on everything near you. Leave that honest woman alone, or I'll——'

He made a threatening gesture, and Moroza pulled up his horse.

'Hold hard! how you flare up! there's no joking with you. You were of the right sort formerly, but now you are altogether a different man,' said Moroza, trying to soothe Vasili.

The latter, instead of answering, merely gave him a look full of hatred.

'I only meant that you are on very good terms with your mistress,' Moroza went on. 'She never drives out nowadays except with you on the box. That is all well enough, but you had better mind what you are about, for she is a sly card. As long as you don't let your tongue wag——'

Moroza spoke absolutely at random; he had not the slightest suspicion of having hit upon the truth. He was merely taking precautions; but when he noticed Vasili's confusion he became more seriously alarmed.

'You haven't said anything?' he asked pointedly.

'A great deal of use that would be,' answered Vasili wearily.

'I say, brother, come home with me and have a cup of tea,' said Moroza, his alarm getting the better of him. 'I have some capital brandy.'

'Much obliged,' sneered Vasili; 'your goodwife prepares the drink of her guests too well to suit my taste.'

And without waiting for further parley he cut across the fields, and was soon out of sight and out of hearing.

Moroza brooded all the way home. His wife stood waiting at the door, and scarcely had he flung the reins on the horse's back before she set to unharnessing it. In the twinkling of an eye the cart was unloaded, and pushed under the penthouse, the horse taken to the stable and littered down comfortably.

Husband and wife went into the house, and in another moment the steaming tea-urn, prepared beforehand, stood on the table.

'Everything all right?' asked Mavra laconically.

'Everything is all right in town,' answered Moroza. 'But there is something in the wind. I have just met Vasili.'

'The coachman?'

'Yes.'

The husband and wife looked at one another without speaking.

'I did not like the idea of his coming back here,' said Moroza at last. 'This Countess is too sharp. I've got my suspicions.'

'Did he say anything to you?' asked Mavra, all at once becoming uneasy.

Thereupon her husband told her all that had happened. Mavra did not attempt to interrupt him, but when he had finished she gave her opinion in a few words.

'I don't like it. He may turn round upon us one of these fine days.'

'How can we prevent it?' asked the steward.

His wife looked him straight in the face. She understood the drift of his question.

'No,' she said at last. 'It wouldn't be wise. What we ought to do is to have done with the whole thing as quickly as possible. If not, all our trouble will have been in vain. We must have done with your sister-in-law.' Mavra smiled contemptuously in pronouncing the last word, on which she laid great stress. 'If she were gone, the little boy would not be much in our way They would appoint a guardian. Guardians don't matter much; they don't worry themselves or other people.'

'You are right,' said Moroza; 'but how can we get rid

of her? More mushrooms? They did not succeed the last time.'

'No—no more mushrooms,' answered Mavra, in a determined manner. 'We can get rid of her in another way. As it is, the people about here are not so sweet upon her. It is because they like us—we are the real masters here.'

There was an air of pride about Mavra as she raised her head. She, indeed, felt herself to be the sovereign mistress of the village, where the men obeyed none but her husband, where the women only took counsel with her.

She beckoned her husband into a corner, and the conversation was carried on in a low whisper. The debate was a long one, and when they had come to an understanding Moroza lay down on a wooden settle and fell asleep. His wife left the room quietly.

It had been a bright and beautiful day, but the afternoon was already far advanced when Helen Marsof made up her mind to go for a stroll, as she did now and then. She had just closed the garden-gate, and was accompanied by her son, when she found herself confronted by Mavra.

'Thou art going for a walk?' said the latter respectfully.

'Yes,' replied Helen curtly. 'What is it you want?'

'If thou art going for a walk, it would be well for thee to pass through the village and to look at the wells. It has been very hot, and the water is getting so low that we are afraid of not having enough for the cattle next week. Thy late husband spoke of digging a conduit from the river. I am afraid it will have to be done. But one can't decide without you.'

'I will see to it on my way back,' said Helen, taking her son's hand and going in the direction of the fields.

Mavra watched the elegant figure in black standing out in bold relief against the golden sky.

'Go, go, and take thy walk,' she said aloud; 'go and dig the hole which I intend to swallow thee to-morrow.'

It was Saturday, and the peasants had returned early from their labours to go to the bath. The vapour bath is the great, almost the sole, enjoyment of the Russian rural populations. The bath, the swing, and the see-saw are pretty well the only recreations among the villagers, except the mimic choruses sung on Sundays by the young girls as they slowly walk in a ring on the village green.

Hence, everyone had returned early in honour of the weekly ablution. The women had been looking to the stove, the water was boiling in the reservoir, and the switches, ready for use—that is to say, to be applied to the robust amateurs fond of flagellation—were arranged on the wooden benches spotlessly clean. But the woman entrusted on that day with the task of heating the bath had overdone the thing; at the instigation of Mavra, she had piled up the wood to such an extent as to forbid an entrance for at least two hours on the penalty of being suffocated. The villagers, vexed at having to wait, began to grumble. The men, as a rule, take their turn first; the women come after, and manage as best they can with the remains of the water and the heat. As a matter of course, the men were the most impatient, though they knew that, after all, they would have the best of it.

Groups of idlers had congregated everywhere, near the bath-house, in the open spaces, and wherever

there was room for three or four persons. The conversations were not very animated—the Russian peasant is not a great talker. So they stood merely looking about, to the right and left, scanning the fields and computing the value of the coming crops. Helen Marsof appeared at the entrance of the village; her son was walking by her side, carrying a large nosegay of grasses and wild flowers. At the sight of the groups the widow felt uncomfortable. They did not like her, and she was aware of the fact. And though she had nothing to reproach herself with, she suffered from the injustice of those for whom she did most. She passed on sad and dignified as usual, greeting her dependents with a kindly nod of the head. The men had doffed their caps, and stood stock-still, but no mark of deference or of sympathy was added to this enforced homage.

'Here's a well, mother,' said the boy.

Helen followed her son and bent over the square opening railed off with logs.

'I don't think the water has got so low as all that,' she said aloud.

But she was talking to herself rather than to her child.

Then she went to another part of the village, while the peasants, failing to understand the drift of these perambulations, were inquisitively looking after her.

'What is she doing?' they asked one another.

A mysterious voice came from one of the groups.

'She is bewitching the wells,' it said.

'What nonsense!' exclaimed a second voice.

'We'll soon see,' rang out a third.

'The bath is ready,' piped an urchin, running along barefooted.

The men made in a serried mass for the bath-house,

and when they got there found Madame Marsof measuring with a pole the well that fed the reservoir.

A low growl was heard as she withdrew the pole from the muddy water. She turned round, surprise written on her face. The peasants stared at her without moving.

'Good-bye,' she said, nodding to them, taking the direction of her home.

They watched her until she was fairly out of sight. More than one sent the reverse of a blessing after her, but she was too far away to hear.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

NEXT morning Alexander had a slight cough; the walk of the day before had tired him, he had been restless during the night; his mother did not care to disturb him, and remained by his bedside.

The bell ringing for church at half-past nine failed to awaken the lad, and Helen made up her mind to stay at home that morning. She sent the servants and all the other inmates, only keeping one maid at home in case she wanted her. That done, she sat down by the window.

A few moments later the child awoke. His sleep had done him good.

His first thoughts on opening his eyes were for his mother, to whom he cried a cheery good-morning. Then he sent a kiss to the portrait of his father; it was Helen who had taught him to do this when a mere infant, and during the long and frequent absences of the fickle husband.

The maid came in to dress the lad, and Madame Marsof

sat down once more by the window. An hour went by; Alexander had taken the cup of milk of which his breakfast consisted, and had cuddled up to his mother. They were both watching the green in front of the church, expecting the crowd to come out shortly. At last the clang of the bells announcing the benediction rang out upon the air; a few housewives in a greater hurry than the rest scampered across the open space, on which the congregation gradually gathered.

The hour immediately after divine service is in Russia the hour for conversation. The peasantry, who have no church of their own, come in their bright, carefully washed carts; their small horses have been well groomed, their coats shine like wax, their manes and tails have been carefully combed. There is a fair exchange of such ideas as are current in the country; in one word, it is the moment when the Russian peasant is most like the other peasants in Europe.

Helen and her son sat intently watching the stir and bustle of that motley crowd. The white bodices, the crimson kirtles of the young girls; the head-dresses of the married women, shaped like mitres and embroidered with pearls; their linen streamers worked in red or quaintly hem-stitched; their necklets of beads pending on their bosoms—all this ever-changing mass of colour flashed and shimmered in the sunlight. Their voices filled the air. The scene was picturesque beyond compare, and Helen, with the instinct of an artist, feasted upon it.

All of a sudden a woman flung herself into the thickest group, shouting and gesticulating; but her words were lost upon Madame Marsof. The crowd gathered closer around her, and when her lamentations were seemingly at their height, another peasant, and then a third, came to increase the hurly-burly.

'What is the matter with them, mother?' asked Alexander.

'I don't know,' came the answer. 'But something has happened, for they are very excited.'

And, in fact, the noise grew louder; hostile cries, addressed to someone, uprose from the hissing crowd. Helen called for her maid, but she had disappeared.

'Let us go and see what is the matter, mother,' said Alexander, scampering about with glee.

Helen looked through the window. Every eye was suddenly directed towards her, every finger pointed at her. Both looks and gestures were threatening. Helen instinctively closed the window. The noise seemed immediately to grow louder and louder.

'What is the matter with you, mother?' said the lad, pressing close against her.

'I am afraid,' said Helen, trying to hear the clamour more distinctly. She felt sure that her name had been shouted once or twice.

The tumult increased; one of the women who had scurried away before the service was fairly over had, on her return home, found a newly-thrown calf dead by the side of the trough. In her consternation she had rushed away to tell the news to her gossips. Almost at the same moment another peasant found his dog lying dead in his yard; a third had lost his pet lamb. At first the whole village stood listening to these tales, awe-stricken to a man. They were inclined to look upon those coincidences as a punishment from Heaven.

The Russian peasant is not only a fatalist, but superstitious into the bargain. The crowd was trying to find an explanation. Moroza saw his chance, and it was he who uttered the words that had gone the round on the previous evening.

'The wells are bewitched,' he said in a low voice.

'Bewitched! say, poisoned,' yelled someone else.

That was enough. The whole crowd repeated:

'Poisoned.'

In the twinkling of an eye the groups had gathered into a compact mass, shouting frantically and clenching their fists. The mistress had been seen on the night before, meddling with the wells and muttering strange words. To the knowledge and in the sight of everybody she had been walking up and down with her son, who was carrying herbs—potent and noxious herbs, as a matter of course.

'Poisoned!' shouted a voice above the others. 'It would not be her first attempt. Don't we all know that her son was taken ill not long ago?'

'And the master, who came by his death in so strange a manner!' shouted a third.

It was then that Helen shut the window.

Ivan Moroza and his wife were exciting the crowd by every means in their power; the very retiring habits of Helen Marsof became an argument against her at their hands. She never darkened anyone's door; even that morning she had stopped away from church, so as not to come in contact with her dependents.

'She is accursed; she spends her nights in concocting poisons. Her lamp may be seen burning till daybreak,' thundered a voice.

'She'll be the death of us all,' yelled another. 'We shall be afraid to slake our thirst. Our cattle will perish.'

At the idea of the cattle perishing under their very eyes the crowd became mad with rage. With one terrific yell it marched towards the house. The peasants of the adjacent villages, whose wells were not supposed

to have suffered, joined the others, and shouted louder still.

'Death to the witch!' roared someone.

In such cases no one ever knows who sets the ball rolling.

'Death to the witch!' repeated the rabble, rushing forward and only stopping at the threshold of Helen's home.

The servants who had returned, perhaps, had taken flight; at any rate, not one could be found. Helen, dressed in black as usual, and leading her son by the hand, appeared upon the threshold like a statue of grief nobly borne.

'What is the matter?' she said in a voice clear as a bell, though slightly shaking with indignation rather than fear.

'You witch!' sounded a clear voice from the hindmost ranks.

The serried mass just advanced another half-yard, repeating:

'You witch! you witch!'

It could go no further except by mounting the shallow flight of steps, at the top of which Helen stood. There were only five steps between her and her aggressors. But nothing daunted, she said in a firm voice:

'I a witch? What have I done to you? You must be mad.'

'Thou hast poisoned the wells. We saw thee yesterday.'

Helen shook her head slowly.

'Mavra Moroza told me you had no water. I went to see for myself; I did nothing else.'

'And thy husband whom thou hast killed, and thy son whom thou hast poisoned.'

Helen caught her son to her arms.

'May Heaven strike us down together if what you say is true!'

Then there was a moment of silence. The crowd evidently wavered. Moroza, who was on the outer edge of it, shouted from afar:

'We have had enough talk. Take off the spell you have cast on the wells.'

'I have done nothing!' exclaimed Helen. 'You are a set of wretches, and you shall all be sent to Siberia; you shall be the first, Moroza.'

The words acted like fuel on the fire. The rabble, beside itself, and understanding the risk it was incurring, rushed up the steps. Quick as lightning, Helen pushed her son into the hall, closed the door upon him, and with outspread arms stood facing her assailants. Her eyes flashed fire. She made up her mind to die, but to sell her life dearly.

'Burn the housed own, and the witch with it!' thundered Moroza.

The people were as wax in his hand. The words had scarcely left his lips before they took up the cry, strode away in all directions, and as quickly returned with faggots and tow and shavings. But no one dared lay hands on Helen, who did not budge an inch, and kept standing against the door, her arms outspread, a living barrier between the peasants and her child.

'God will assuredly punish you,' she said. But her voice was firm, and her lips, though bloodless, betrayed no sign of emotion. 'God hereafter, but the Czar first.'

'Have done with your blasphemy, and think about your own repentance first!' yelled a ruffian.

A smile of contempt overspread Helen's features, but she did not reply.

In fact, the last words had scarcely died away upon the air when there arose a still greater noise, and the crowd turned round to see the cause of it. In another moment they were scattered in all directions by Raïssa's carriage that came thundering up to the door. Vasili was on the box, and neither he nor his mistress heeded the cries and imprecations of the rabble, some of whom had got under the horses' hoofs. Then there was a lull, and Raïssa, by whose side was seated Tikhone, very dignified and erect, jumped out.

'Pack of fools that you are! Do you want to go to Siberia, everyone of you?' she cried, standing on the bottom step.

The word 'Siberia' on Raïssa's lips had a meaning different to that on Helen's.

The young Countess had been sent by the Czar, and had the right to speak of Siberia, while the other one——

'Thy sister-in-law has poisoned our wells!' roared one of the most turbulent whom the horses' hoofs had spared.

'Your wells!' repeated Raïssa. 'She poisoned your wells as she poisoned her husband! Do you wish to know who has poisoned the one and the other, who is the fiend that will ruin all of you in the end? There he stands!' and she pointed to Moroza, who in vain tried to hide himself in the crowd.

'Moroza?' they repeated in a tone of surprise.

'Yes, Moroza, and here are the witnesses to his crimes. These two men have seen him kill his master. Is it true? Say, Vasili; say, Tikhone!'

The two men took off their caps and answered:

'We take God to witness it is true.'

'He drugged your master, and then put him down in the forest to be frozen to death, so that his crime might

remain unpunished, and it is he himself who dares accuse his mistress! You parcel of fools, you believe everything he tells you!'

'Thou liest!' yelled Mavra, making her way through the crowd. She confronted the two women and hissed out: 'You have got a grudge against my husband; you slander him; you have bribed those two to bear false witness against him . . . but it does not take away that she has poisoned the wells.' Then, turning to the crowd: 'A fire, a fire, and let's have done with it!'

Hostile clamours rose upon the air.

'Then you shall burn me with her!' shouted Raïssa, taking her sister-in-law, who was fast losing consciousness, into her arms.

The crowd wavered. To burn Helen was all very well, but to mete out the same fate to the young Countess, who had been sent by the Czar, was a horse of another colour. And besides, Vasili, who remained on the box, had a way of managing his spirited black horses which made their presence very unpleasant. Raïssa was not slow to perceive her chance, and took advantage of it.

'In the name of the Czar,' she cried, and her voice reached the farthest limits of the crowd that was already dispersing; 'in the name of the Czar, I command you to arrest Moroza and his wife! They'll answer for their crimes to the authorities and to the throne.'

In less than a moment, and without any more apparent reason than Raïssa's appeal, Moroza's warmest friends were transformed into his gaolers. He and his wife were hemmed in by a compact group that made it impossible for them to stir.

Suddenly there was a regular stampede. Fadéi, panting for breath, appeared on the spot, and close at

his heels came a low-wheeled carriage drawn by two ponies. At the sight of its occupant, even those who had been maimed by Vasili's horses took to their heels as if by a miracle.

'The *stanovoi*, the *stanovoi!*' shouted Fadéi in a hoarse voice.

The *stanovoi*, for it was he—the rural commissary of police, the dispenser of 'whipcord' to the serf in days gone by—enjoyed, and, to a certain extent, still enjoys, a reputation like that of the Antichrist. By the time he alighted from his droschki, he was confronted by the partizans of the good cause only, who securely held Moroza and his wife between them.

Helen had fainted; Raïssa had her carried into the house where Alexander stood trembling and sobbing. The tears and endearments of the child, rather than the means ordinarily used in such cases, soon restored the mother to consciousness.

'Are they gone?' she asked, as soon as she opened her eyes.

'The *stanovoi* is looking after them,' replied Fadéi, who seemed quite in his element, and who was as chirrupy as a bird.

'How was it that the *stanovoi* came at all?' asked Helen, quite recovered by now.

'The young Countess sent for him last night when she heard rumours of poisoned wells and witchcraft. She has got her head screwed to her shoulders the right way,' added the old man knowingly. 'The Czar knew what he was about when he sent her to us.'

At that moment Raïssa entered the room. She had given the *stanovoi* the necessary explanations.

'Sister,' said Helen, holding out her arms to her, 'my son and I owe you our lives.'

Raïssa flung herself on Helen's breast, choking with sobs. The heavens seemed to have opened to her. Never had Helen looked so like her brother.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE summer was gone; the chill October winds whistled through the trees. The trial of the Morozas had been a summary one; the simple fact of having incited others to rebel against their masters was sufficient to send them to Siberia. They were sentenced to penal servitude in the mines for life. That kind of exile was quite different from the mere exile of Count Gretzky and his friends. They were free to enjoy all the comforts their own means or those supplied by relations could procure for them.

Nevertheless, on being informed of the sentence that struck her enemies, Helen Marsof could not help uttering a deep sigh.

'Siberia, Siberia,' she said. 'Siberia for them as for my brother!'

Raïssa instinctively sympathized with those painful reflections of her sister-in-law. She would have done everything to spare them to her, but she was powerless.

'It almost seems as if I were powerful for evil only,' she said one evening, turning away from the window at which she had been standing for some time.

Madame Marsof had come over, as she frequently did now. Alexander could sleep in peace since the Morozas were gone; his mother had no fear of leaving him; her servants had become as devoted as they were formerly ungrateful. It was not mere slavishness on the part of

these ignorant people. After having lent a too willing ear to slander, they tried their utmost to redeem their error by unconditional submission.

At Raïssa's words, betraying the despondency of her mind, Helen came up to her and caught her hand in hers.

'Do not I and my son count?' she said. 'What harm have you done to us?'

The two women looked at each other affectionately. They felt that henceforth nothing could come between them and their friendship. Still Raïssa shook her head sadly.

'Your brother is out yonder, and I am the cause of his misfortune.'

'No, you are not its cause. He himself was. We come of a headstrong and violent race. But I am inclined to believe that he is sorry for what he has done.' Raïssa raised her head, waiting for an explanation. Helen went on: 'He repents of what he has done in silence. Truly, he would be unjust indeed, if after what you have done for him and for me he still bore a grudge.'

Raïssa kept silent. What was the good of wasting words. Who could cure her heart's wounds?

'Of course I need not tell you that I told him everything that has occurred, and how you saved me from a most horrible death,' continued Helen.

Raïssa tightly grasped the hand of her sister-in-law, who could never allude to that terrible day without trembling.

'It is more than three months since I wrote to him,' said Madame Marsof, 'and the answer came yesterday.'

It was Raïssa's hand that shook in Madame Marsof's this time.

'I got his answer. He thanks you from the bottom of his heart for all that you have done for me. He says

that he himself would never have had the courage, the perseverance, and the presence of mind.'

'He has not written to me,' said Raïssa, averting her head.

Helen kept silent for a moment.

'My aunt Gretzky also thanks you, and she will write to you.' Raïssa bowed her head in thanks, but did not reply. 'Do you know that you are being very much admired in St. Petersburg?' Helen went on, endeavouring to cheer her sister-in-law, who was visibly discouraged. 'The Emperor has expressed himself in strong terms of approval of your conduct; all those who formerly blamed you extol you to the skies. If you cared to go back you would be more enthusiastically welcomed than a grand duchess.'

'I'll stop where I am,' said Raïssa, in so strange a voice that Helen leant forward to look at her.

'You are crying! What is the matter?'

Raïssa fell on Helen's shoulder and sobbed bitterly. It was a relief to her to have a friend to whom she could confide her grief. She had borne her constraint too long.

'What ails you?' asked Helen, surprised at this violent outburst of sorrow.

'Your brother hates me,' sighed Raïssa.

Helen, more astonished still, was afraid to speak. At last, however, she ventured to say in a low voice:

'And you?'

'I—I love him!' said Raïssa stoutly; albeit that she placed her hand upon her heart to still its throbbing.

The words were a revelation to Helen. This was a contingency she had never thought about. In her pure and simple-minded life as a wife and widow she had never speculated upon the feelings of a wife situated as was Raïssa. At first she thought that the young woman

detested her husband. Afterwards, and seeing that she displayed no hatred towards her nor hers, she came to the conclusion that it was merely indifference. Raïssa's devotion to her interests and welfare had been attributed to noble-mindedness, the characteristic of a generous disposition. And all at once the revelation of a feeling absolutely novel, inconceivable, almost incomprehensible to her, was sprung upon her. How and when could Raïssa have conceived any love for this husband who had so strangely entered her life.

After having pondered those things for a moment or so, she summed them up in one question:

'How is it you love him?'

'I love him,' said Raïssa, 'because he is my husband. What man could I love unless it be the one whom God and the Czar have given me for a spouse?'

'If such be the case,' observed Helen, more and more surprised, 'if you love him, why should you live apart from one another? I thought you hated him.'

Raïssa shook her head sadly.

'It is he who hates me. He hates me to such a degree that up till now I do not know whether he or another of the three should be my husband.'

Then she told Helen what she and the world at large had never known, and the cruel silence of Valerian with regard to Raïssa. Everyone had been under the impression that the Emperor's decision had struck the real culprit; no one thought it possible that Gretzky would have accepted the sentence as relating to his marriage if he had not committed the crime.

'And he refused to tell you?' said the widow. 'But it is too horrible. I never thought him cruel.'

'But just consider how he must hate me,' protested Raïssa eagerly. 'He lost everything through me, and

found himself tied for ever to her whom he looked upon as his enemy.'

'At that time, yes. But since then?'

'Since then . . . we have been separated.'

'It is you who defend him; it is I who accuse him,' said Helen, smiling. 'We have changed parts. Poor Raïssa!'

'You may well say "poor Raïssa!"' said the latter, sighing. 'I am condemned for life never to think of my husband without shame and horror. And suppose it was not he . . .'

When Helen went home that night she wrote a long letter full of reproaches to her brother, in which she pointed out to him how very cruel his silence was. But Valerian never read that letter, because the mail only went twice a month, and many things occurred before the epistle reached its destination.

CHAPTER XL.

SOME months later the two women and little Alexander were sitting at luncheon one morning in Raïssa's dining-room, when there was a sudden noise of wheels and horses outside the window. The first snow had fallen on the evening before, and the cold was beginning to sting sharply. Raïssa, therefore, was wondering who could be the visitor, when Fadéi, with equal wonderment depicted on his face, rushed, rather than walked, in.

'Her Excellency Princess Manourine,' he gasped, in vain endeavouring to preserve the respectful attitude and tone of voice he rarely lost in the presence of the ladies.

'Princess Manourine?' repeated Raïssa; 'who can that be?'

'It is she whom, at St. Petersburg, people call Princess Adine,' explained Helen. 'What brings her here?'

'Show the Princess into the drawing-room,' said Raïssa; 'I'll be with her directly.'

'There's no need to show her in,' replied the old man, still upset. 'She walked in, and she gave orders to undo her boxes. The hall is full of them.'

The sisters-in-law looked at one another with stupefaction. All at once Helen exclaimed:

'By-the-bye, she is a Rézof. Something has happened out yonder.'

Raïssa ran to the drawing-room and rushed in. The moment she entered Princess Adine—for it was she—flung herself into her arms, then flung herself into those of Helen.

'My dears!' she exclaimed; 'I never thought I would get here alive. What an endless journey!'

Exceedingly astonished at these demonstrations of affection, the two ladies forgot to tell their guest to sit down. Princess Adine threw herself on the sofa.

'I must tell you it is my husband who sent me. It is the first time in his life that he told me to do something that gives me pleasure. I suppose you are Raïssa Gretzky? People may well say that you are handsome. I did not think, though, that you could be as handsome as you are. You are all the fashion, my dear; everyone is raving about you. They never speak of you except as the noble Raïssa, the sublime Raïssa. I am not exaggerating; it is a positive fact. Is it true that you prevented the peasants from setting Madame Marsof's house on fire? It is true, is it not? I thought it was a mere

cock-and-bull story, a legend; but it is true after all. What a fright you must have had!'

The two ladies had by this time made up their minds to patiently await the conclusion of the Princess Adine's discourse; but, perceiving that this conclusion was likely to be postponed till doomsday, Raïssa gently led the truant thoughts of the pretty Princess back to the starting-point.

'It is your husband who sent you?' she asked sweetly.

'Yes,' came the answer. 'It is scarcely credible, but it is still a fact, nevertheless. What is funnier still, he who prevented me once from coming to you, hurried me on to such an extent, that had I listened to him I should have come away in my dressing-gown, without a single frock. As it is, I only took twelve hours to pack my trunks.'

'In that case, the reason of your visit must be a serious one,' said Helen, in her placid way.

'What!' exclaimed the Princess, starting to her feet. 'Have I not told you? Typhoid fever has broken out at Omsk. Our exiles are in the midst of it, and my brother is down with it.'

The sisters-in-law looked at one another with consternation.

'Right in the midst of it, I tell you,' Adine went on, 'and not a single intelligent doctor near. Of course, none but idiots would go thither of their own free will. There is not a nurse for miles around. They nurse one another.'

'What is it you wish me to do?' asked Raïssa in her tranquil way, though her voice shook a little.

'I have come to beseech you, in Madame Sabakine's name, and in that of Aunt Gretzky, to go and ask the

Emperor to pardon our exiles. He cannot refuse you—it is impossible; but no one but you can obtain that pardon.'

Raïssa looked at her sister-in-law, who, to the mute question, replied simply:

'Go at once.'

'I am going,' said Raïssa. 'I thank you, Princess, for your trouble. Are you going back with me?'

'What! already? What a wonderful woman you are! You are not going like that, without any preparation?'

With a wave of the hand Raïssa gave the Princess clearly to understand that preparations, in the way she understood them, were unnecessary, and left her visitor to arrange for her departure. While they were hurriedly getting a few things together, and the big travelling-carriage was being prepared, Helen took the Princess to a spare bedroom, and left her to her toilette. She went back to Raïssa, whom she found totting up her last accounts, and giving instructions as to matters during her absence.

Helen waited patiently until her sister-in-law had dismissed her servants. When she was alone with her, she said quietly:

'You are going; that is all right. Get the Emperor to sign their pardon. He is not likely to refuse you. But if you'll be guided by me, lose no time in sending it to them.'

'I shall take it myself,' replied Raïssa. 'Do you think I would leave such a thing to strangers? Every minute is precious. And suppose he should fall ill himself—should die——'

Without a word Helen took Raïssa into her arms and muttered a silent prayer over her.

'God is with you, and all you undertake,' she said afterwards, aloud. 'I am sometimes tempted to believe that you are one of His angels.'

Shortly afterwards Raïssa came downstairs, dressed in black, ready for a long journey, perfectly composed as usual, but very pale. Once more she was starting for the unknown, and such a fearful unknown.

'Ready?' exclaimed the Princess, who was lazily sipping her tea in the dining-room. 'I thought you would want at least two days to do your packing.'

'People that are ill cannot afford to wait,' replied Raïssa; 'but if you are tired with your journey, Princess, pray remain as long as you like. My sister-in-law will only be too pleased to keep you company.'

'Only too pleased' was a mere figure of speech on Raïssa's part, for she fully shared the apprehension written on Helen's face, lest this inevitable should be accepted. Adine looked in turns at the two ladies.

'No, thank you,' she said to Raïssa. 'You are too wonderful a woman; I must go back with you. It is a unique opportunity to make your acquaintance thoroughly.'

The Princess's pretensions 'to make the acquaintance thoroughly' of the young Countess drew a smile from Helen, notwithstanding her grave preoccupations.

Fadéi had seated himself on the box by the side of the coachman.

'What, are you also going?' exclaimed Raïssa, when she got on the top of the shallow flight of steps, which, notwithstanding the frequent application of the broom, were covered with a thin layer of snow.

Fadéi uncovered his gray head, and looked imploringly at his mistress.

'But we are going a long way; Heaven alone knows

how long!' protested Raïssa mildly. 'Have you considered that? Remember, you are no longer young.'

'Ah, mistress,' said the old man in a voice choked with sobs, 'let me live and die in the service of my master!'

Raïssa did not reply; but a wave of her hand told the old man to remain where he was.

A lingering look, a sweet sad smile at Helen, who was holding Alexander's hand, and the wheels began to move in the fine and glistening snow. In about a minute or so Raïssa looked back; the house that had played so great a part in her destiny was already being hidden by a waving curtain of descending flakes, through which it was impossible to distinguish anything.

'Towards the unknown once more,' she said to herself, stifling a deep sigh.

CHAPTER XLI.

PRINCESS ADINE'S conversation, though rambling in the extreme, was also very amusing. She told Raïssa a great many interesting particulars of the bigwigs of St. Petersburg; at the same time, young Countess Gretzky picked up a number of valuable hints on dress, and on the way of managing husbands. There being no likelihood of utilizing the latter, she did not pay much attention to them.

Notwithstanding the bright and easy talk of the Princess, Raïssa found time hanging heavily on her hands; so it was with intense joy that she beheld the domes and roofs of St. Petersburg appearing on the horizon, and standing in bold relief against the white autumn sky.

Almost immediately after her arrival, she called upon Countess Gretzky, and this time she was received with open arms.

'You are a woman, a noble, genuine woman!' said the old lady to the niece whom she had not chosen. 'You would grace a throne! I am happy and proud to call you a member of my family. And if my nephew does not treat you as he ought to do, it is he who will find my doors shut against him.'

An audience with the Emperor was soon and readily granted. They were only too pleased in high places to accord the pardon prayed for. Apart from all other considerations, Raïssa's conduct during those few years deserved reward, and it appeared that she considered the return of her husband the only one worth craving.

'A strange fancy, assuredly,' thought some. 'Hypocrisy,' said others. At Court itself, they did not pretend to look for hidden motives. They simply said that Raïssa was a noble woman, and that she was fond of doing good for its own sake.

No one for a moment dreamt that love for her husband might be at bottom of all this.

When the pardon had been obtained, she had still to request permission to be the personal bearer of it.

'She wishes to go herself?' said the Emperor, when Countess Gretzky presented the petition to that effect. 'She, so young a woman, and at this season when the roads are so unsafe! This is really carrying devotion to the verge of heroism.'

The request was nevertheless granted, and Countess Gretzky, her heart throbbing with emotion and joy, brought the news to her niece, who was waiting, a prey to violent anguish. When she beheld the document in her aunt's hand, the mask behind which she had for

several days hidden her anxious sufferings dropped, and Raïssa burst into tears.

'I start to-night,' she said.

'Go, my child,' said the old Countess quietly. 'Go, for where the road fails thee, God will give thee wings.'

And Raïssa went, accompanied as usual by Fadéi. During many seemingly endless days and nights, the low and cover-in sledge, which they call a *vazok* in Russia, flew, so to speak, over the virgin snow; more than once the snowstorms enwrapt Raïssa, her vehicle and her hopes. She passed where the caravans had not dared to venture: night after night the packs of hungry wolves kept up with her, watching with lurid eyes the slightest stumble of the horses, the slightest trace of alarm on the part of the guides; but Raïssa sat unmoved through it all.

In the far distance, behind the mountains at the end of the snow-covered plains, beyond the sombre forests, she beheld a log hut, and in it, in the throes of excruciating suffering, in the grip of death, perhaps, the man who had refused to give her such peace on earth as he was capable of giving; and she felt that should this man die, life would be at an end for her.

One evening, as she was getting near the goal of her journey, when she was but a few hours distant from it, a horrible doubt crossed her mind for the first time.

'If it be not he, it must be one of the other two, and I shall be face to face with him, without knowing him. But the man himself will know, and Valerian will know. What a depth of misery and shame!'

Raïssa covered her face with her hands, to exorcise the hateful picture of undeserved shame, and she was near regretting the loyal devotion that had prompted

her to come. But it was too late to go back; besides, the pardon was there lying on her bosom. After all, it was something to be a messenger of joy to those who had suffered so much.

The melancholy dawn of a winter's day broke sullen over the smoke-begrimed log huts, when Raïssa's *vazok* drew up before the dwelling of the master of police. The verification of the documents of which the young Countess was the bearer took but a little while, and with the respect due to her name and position she was escorted to her husband's cabin.

The three men were alive. It was so much gained; but Valerian was very ill indeed.

Raïssa was ushered into a low dark room, its walls hidden by Asiatic rugs, and to which the objects sent by her from St. Petersburg imparted an air of luxury and comfort, strangely at variance with the outer surroundings.

On a small bedstead, piled up with fur rugs, from which peeped the gossamer sheets, embroidered with the Gretzky initials, lay Count Valerian. He had been delirious for the last six days. As she entered, an attenuated, spectre-like figure rose to welcome her. It was Rézof.

He did not recognise her; she had changed so much, and he had seen so little of her. He was just going to ask her name; being under the impression that she was the wife of the governor of the province, or some other great lady happening to pass that way and desirous of being useful.

'I am Raïssa Gretzky,' said the young woman.

Rézof, astounded, attempted to rise from his chair, but he was still so weak as to sway to and fro. Raïssa held out her hand to him in support, and gently made

him sit down; he kept her hand in his, and respectfully put his lips to it. But neither spoke a word.

Valerian was almost entirely unconscious. Long fits of torpor succeeded the shorter fits of delirium. At such times he dropped into a heavy and comatose sleep. Raïssa took her seat by the bedside, arranged his pillows, smoothed the coverlet, and buttoned the wristbands of her husband round his emaciated wrists. As if by magic the sick-bed assumed a calmer and more comfortable look.

'How did you come here?' whispered Rézof. He imagined he was under the influence of some delusion.

'I bring good news,' replied Raïssa, with an angelic smile. One of her fears had been dispelled since her arrival. The outrage had not been committed by Rézof; she felt sure of that.

'Good news?' repeated the latter, in a voice so feeble that it sounded as if coming from a distance. 'Can any good news come to us?'

At that moment Sabakine came in. He had been the first to fall ill; hence he was better attended to, because he had his two friends near him: while Rézof had only had Gretzky, and Gretzky himself had no other nurses than the two men, scarcely recovered. Leaning on his stick like an old man, Sabakine walked as quickly as his tottering legs would allow him.

'You have come to see us,' he said to Raïssa, 'and at this time of the year, when we are often three months without tidings from the outer world, for the mail neither comes nor goes. This is courage indeed.'

Raïssa said to herself that, to all appearance, Sabakine was not the guilty one any more than Rézof.

'The Countess brings good news,' said Rézof. 'Speak,

madame, I implore you! Is there any likelihood of our returning to Europe one day?'

Too happy at the thought of the joy that she was conferring to reflect upon her imprudence, Raïssa took the Emperor's pardon from between the folds of her dress, and handed it to Rézof.

'Great heavens!' exclaimed he, falling back in his chair in a dead faint.

Thanks to Raïssa and Sabakine, who was stronger and less sensitive than his friend, Rézof soon came to himself. Raïssa was cruelly taking herself to task for her impetuousness.

'Pray, madame, do not mind it. People do not die with joy,' observed the young fellow, still pale with emotion, and scarcely able to speak. 'You are indeed a messenger sent from on high.'

At that moment Valerian began to rave. His inarticulate growls, which soon changed into angry yells and cries of pain, recalled those at his bedside to the sad reality. The journey to Europe was still a thing of the distant future, nor were they sure of taking their friend back with them.

Rézof and Sabakine were dismissed to their homes so long deserted by them, and Raïssa, assisted by Fadéi as usual, sat down by Valerian's bedside.

During the hours of delirium the poor young wife bore many a sore trial. Every now and then the sick man, who was not conscious of her presence for a single moment, cursed her with cries of intense rage; at other times he wept and implored his sister to forgive him for having misjudged her. Raïssa was obliged to answer him as if she were Helen; she was bound to address the most affectionate words to him, to allow him to kiss her hands, to stroke his burning and throbbing forehead,

until he dropped off to sleep more calm than usual. Often her scalding tears fell on his cheeks, as she endeavoured gently to disengage her hands from his. What would not she have given to be able to take to herself the loving words showered upon the absent sister by the delirious brother!

CHAPTER XLII.

By dint of an energetic treatment consistently maintained; by dint of Raïssa's indefatigable tenderness and watchful care; thanks to Fadéi, who spent nights in soothing his master's agitated sleep, Valerian awoke one day as weak as a child, but in full possession of his faculties, and free from fever. This prelude to recovery had been foreseen; the last three nights had thrown Raïssa into a state of lassitude, which was not free from danger itself, but every precaution was taken to spare the patient a shock that might still have proved fatal.

Rézof and Sabakine were by his bedside when Valerian opened his eyes, after many hours of refreshing sleep.

'Is that you?' he said, in the hollow voice of those who have been in the valley of death. 'So you are both alive?'

'You also!' said Rézof cheerfully. 'You know that you are safe. Yes, yes, old fellow, there is no disputing that you are safe.'

An expression of intense comfort stole over Valerian's face. He closed his eyes, the better to enjoy the first delicious languors of convalescence. The same evening he drank some beef-tea, and Sabakine was trying to persuade him that if he found it to his taste, it was because he was better.

Sabakine knew, however, from personal experience, that before Raïssa's arrival the beef-tea was detestable.

'I had a curious hallucination the last few days,' said Valerian. 'It seemed to me that Fadéi was here, and even now it seems to me that I saw him this morning. I must have been dreaming, I suppose.'

'What would you say,' ventured Sabakine, 'if your old servant did come to take care of you?'

Valerian's face showed such a mixture of surprise, pleasure, and hope, that his two friends made a sign to Fadéi, who, hidden behind the door that stood ajar, did not dare to show himself to his master, lest he should give him too great a shock.

'That would be too much of a good thing,' said Valerian. 'But what's the good of talking about impossibilities? Still, I think that the sight of his honest face would set me up altogether.'

A second sign brought Fadéi to the head of the bed. He dared not advance, but Valerian recognised his footstep.

'Are you here, Fadéi?' he said, making an effort to turn round.

The old man dropped on his knees by his master's bedside, and hid his face in the bedclothes.

Gretzky placed his hand on the head of his faithful retainer, and shut his eyes to prevent two big tears coursing down his cheeks.

On that evening Valerian asked for no further explanations. The mind of a convalescent is, as a rule, averse to much thinking. It is satisfied with what is, or what seems to be. An apparent fact is all it wants, without inquiring much as to its cause. Consequently, for the next three days, Valerian showed himself delighted at having his faithful attendant once more by his side. By

what miracle he was there seemed to concern him but little, if at all.

The strangeness of the situation was, however, gradually dawning upon him, and in those moments of semi-wakefulness he began to perceive a certain mystery around him. At certain hours of the day Fadéi regularly disappeared without an ostensible motive. Moreover, a delicate and carefully prepared cuisine whetted the somewhat languid appetite of the three exiles, who took their meals together. One evening a fine cambric handkerchief, which had evidently been forgotten on the table, was pocketed by Fadéi. It was certainly not the old man's property; still, neither Sabakine nor Rézof claimed it as their own.

During those hours of sleeplessness, when he was not asleep, but when they thought him to be, he heard them talk of an invisible someone, from whom emanated the comfort surrounding them. At last his mind became sufficiently strong to wish and to ask for an explanation.

'How did Fadéi come here?' he said to Rézof, who, by this time, was sufficiently recovered to walk about, not only indoors, but outdoors as well.

'He came in a sledge. How else could he come?' replied the young officer, smiling.

'That is not what I asked,' retorted Gretzky peevishly. 'Why, and how did he come?'

'Because you were ill.'

'It's my aunt who sent him?' persisted Valerian.

'It's my sister who sent him word that we were ill.'

'Oh, that's it,' said Gretzky, somewhat disappointed.

He turned on his side, settled his head comfortably in his pillows, and looked round the room. All at once his eye lighted on a small straw basket which, at Raïssa's,

arrival, had been hung on a brass curtain knob, and which had remained there ever since.

'There's someone here!' cried Gretzky, in a voice the strength of which surprised no one more than himself after so long an illness. 'Who is here? I insist upon knowing!'

Rézof saw, in fact, that it was impossible to dissimulate any longer.

'You are right,' he said, 'there is someone here. Someone who has brought good news.'

Valerian stared inquiringly at him. The words 'good news' had provoked a bitter smile.

'Is there such a thing as good news for us?' he asked. 'Exiled as we are, separated from the whole world, we are dead to everybody.'

'Except to your good old Fadéi,' interrupted Rézof, in a reproachful tone. 'Well, in spite of that,' he went on, 'there was someone to bring us good news. When you are well, Gretzky, we will take a journey.'

'A journey?' repeated Gretzky. 'They are sending us further away still. We were too near civilization to please them?'

'No.'

Valerian's face showed such painful anxiety that Rézof could bear it no longer.

'We are going back to St. Petersburg,' he said, tightly clasping the hand of his friend.

'What? Our pardon?'

'Yes.'

Valerian turned as pale as death, and his hand became as ice in that of Rézof, who felt utterly bewildered with fear.

'Countess! Countess!' he shouted, rushing towards the door. 'Come quick, come quick!'

Rezof's cry of distress had scarcely died away, when Raïssa stood by the bedside. Quick as had been the movement, Valerian had already opened his eyes and looked at her with intense stupefaction.

'Idiot!' cried Rézof, trying to tear his hair. 'What have I done?'

It was no use crying over spilt milk. Valerian gave his wife a look as full of anger as of joy. He himself knew not what to think of a foe who had come such a distance to stand by him in his hour of need.

'It is you, madame, who brought our pardon?'

'Yes,' replied Raïssa in a trembling voice.

She dared not raise her eyes to her husband's, lest she should meet once more on his face the cruel irony that had tortured her before.

'And to whom do we owe this pardon? To my aunt, no doubt?'

'To her, to her alone!' shouted Rézof, 'to your wife, to the angel whom you misjudged, and who travelled all the way to Siberia in the middle of winter to bring us joy and health.'

Valerian was still looking at his wife. He could not help seeing how nobly she bore the title conferred upon her by imperial decree. The chaste and noble figure was calculated to inspire respect in everyone, but the recollection of his past sufferings was still too powerful in Valerian's mind to allow him to argue like other people.

'I thank you, madame,' he said slowly, and as it were reluctantly. 'This good deed is to be added to the others. Your revenge is really a noble one.'

He turned away his head and closed his eyes. When he opened them again Raïssa had left the room. Rézof looked at him angrily.

'You may thank your stars that you are ill,' he said to his friend, 'else I should have given you a bit of my mind as regards your conduct.'

'I allow no one to dictate to me as to my conduct,' replied Gretzky drily, closing his eyes once more as if to go to sleep.

He did not, however, sleep. Evening was coming on apace; Rézof went away, and Fadéi took his place by Valerian's bedside. The master lay perfectly still, a thousand thoughts were crowding his brain, but uppermost was that of liberty regained, of going back to St. Petersburg. The lamp was brought in; the evening meal was being got ready; the table laid with expensive napery. Gretzky, when he opened his eyes, saw the table laid for four. As a rule the table was rolled to the side of his bed and was laid for three only. But he expressed no surprise at the new arrangement. When everything was ready his friends came in; Sabakine went straight to the bed.

'Your wife refuses to dine with us,' he said in a surly tone. 'It is thanks to your graceful welcome of her. It seems to me that you might at least be polite to her.'

'Well, she shall have politeness,' said Gretzky. 'Fadéi, go and tell——' Valerian stuck at the fatal word. 'Go and tell the Countess,' he gulped ironically, 'that I shall be pleased if she will dine with us.'

Raïssa came in almost immediately, and they sat down to dinner. Valerian kept looking at her from between his half-closed eyelids. There was an intense curiosity mixed with the ill-will of his investigations. This, then, was the young girl whom he had outraged; this plebeian nobody who had forced herself upon his patrician pride in order to humiliate him. He was fain to confess that

there was no trace of that plebeian origin. This young woman might have been born on the steps of a throne as far as gracefulness and appearance went.

The two officers spoke to, and treated her, like a valued friend. One could plainly perceive that they respected her, that they felt affectionately towards her. Such gleams of comfort and happiness as they had enjoyed during their exile were solely owing to her.

She herself said very little, quietly replying to questions put to her, but evidently not wishing to prolong the conversation. Was it in order not to irritate the patient? was it indifference to her host or hosts?

Valerian did not know what to think.

The dinner over, Raïssa immediately retired, bidding good-night to the three young men, two of whom saluted her cordially. She did not, however, hold out her hand.

'Well,' said Rézof, when the door was closed behind her, 'do you not think her charming?'

Valerian did not reply.

'We had better tell you,' caught up Sabakine. 'Your wife gave us to understand, on the very day of her arrival, that she never considered herself anything but the depositary of our property. The moment we return to Europe she wants to hand her powers over to us, and petition the Emperor to revoke his decision.'

'She may do what she likes; she cannot alter the fact of my being her husband,' replied Gretzky, inwardly ashamed at his ungenerous comment.

'And a good thing she cannot,' observed Sabakine drily, 'seeing that you are the only man whose wife *she ought to be;* but she also hands you over your estates, and keeps nothing for herself.'

'What, then, does she mean to do?' asked Valerian.

'That's for you to find out; we did not think it right to ask her.'

The friends parted for the night, and Valerian was left to himself to chew the cud of his thoughts. A little while after Fadéi stole into the room, lighted the night-light, and stretched himself on a mattress to watch by his master's side. He was just dropping off to sleep when Valerian called him softly. He was up immediately.

'Sit down here,' said Valerian, 'and tell me something about the Countess.'

'Your aunt?'

'No; the young Countess. Tell me how she came to save my sister.'

Fadéi began a long story, which took him about two hours to tell, and informed his master of all the particulars. Up till then, Valerian had only heard the main facts.

'There is no doubt,' he wound up, 'that no one would have the courage and the presence of mind to do what she has done. Nor would anyone have started there and then at the news of your illness. She got your pardon; she gave up all the money. She is a woman out of a million!'

Valerian kept silent for a moment.

'Do you think,' he said at last, 'that I could have this marriage annulled?'

Fadéi threw up his hands.

'Annul this marriage, after all the Countess has done? But, master, if you are not lying in your grave at present, it is owing to her care of you. You owe her your life.'

'Was she here during my illness?' asked Valerian.

'We got here on the sixth day, and she was a fortnight

without taking her clothes off. Once more, master, but for her you would be lying in your grave!'

'Why does she do all this for me?' muttered Valerian, evidently embarrassed.

It annoyed him to owe everything to this woman, whom he thought himself bound to hate.

'Why?' replied Fadéi. 'Because she is of those who return good for evil.'

Gretzky felt inclined to take his old retainer to task for this rebuke directly administered, but false or real shame prevented him from speaking. He pretended to be tired, and fell asleep at last.

CHAPTER XLIII.

Raïssa presided at the meals next day, and the days after that. Gretzky had become accustomed to her presence —at any rate he bore with it, and at times he was not far from desiring it. It was during the evenings when the howling wind accompanied the howling of the hungry wolves around the group of isolated dwellings, when closed shutters and thick window-curtains failed to keep out the feeling of melancholy inseparable from the season —it was at such times that the sight of Raïssa, seated in the armchair, occupied with her needlework, the soft light of the lamp falling upon the beautiful outlines of her handsome face, reminded him of the Fatherland, still so far distant, and already so near. It was at such times that the sight of this silent woman, the incarnation of a happy domestic life, filled Gretzky's soul with vague and hitherto unknown, undreamt-of joy.

Sabakine and Rézof lived more apart now that Valerian was slowly regaining strength. They had gradually

retired, so that husband and wife were more frequently left to themselves. Gretzky, though able to sit up, was still very weak, and spent his days in an easy-chair. At night Raïssa left him, and sent Fadéi to take her place. During those long hours when they were virtually alone, many new impressions arose in Gretzky's mind; the process was a slow but sure one; so that one evening he addressed his wife for the first time in his life.

'Pray tell me something of my sister. What do you think of her?' said he.

Surprised and overjoyed at this mark of confidence, Raïssa told him of Helen; she spoke of her as of a friend whose inmost thoughts she knew, and showed Valerian that she had gauged deeper into his sister's heart than he had—the sister whom he had formerly misjudged.

Gretzky sat listening, putting a question now and then. When he knew all he wanted to know, he said:

'I don't wonder that she loves you.'

After that there was a long silence, but the young woman treasured the words in the recesses of her heart.

Valerian slept soundly that night, but Raïssa's slumbers were sorely agitated. What was the use of half confidences if she was to remain ignorant of what she wished to know more than ever?

So much fatigue, so much grief, told upon the health of the young woman at last. Without being positively ill, a kind of languor took possession of her, until she kept to her room altogether. Truth to tell, those long hours spent in the society of the man she loved, and whose glances she dared not meet, had played sad havoc with her energy. The suffering and struggle were too

much. She made this indisposition the pretext for avoiding Valerian.

At the end of two days, the latter, surprised at his weariness of being alone, went out for the first time, and called upon his friends. The temperature was keen and bright; the snow was beginning to melt. In a little while they might be thinking of going back to Europe. Rejoicing in his recovered health, in his liberty regained, in the lightheartedness that comes to almost everyone with spring, Valerian was looking forward to a long chat with his friends. He found them of less interest than he expected. Their society was not what he wanted that day. Not without a deal of hesitation, and stopping at almost every step, he walked towards Raïssa's dwelling close to his and went in.

At the sight of her husband, the young wife, who was reclining in an armchair, weariness and despondency depicted in her face, rose and offered him a seat. There were the usual congratulations on the subject of his recovery. Then both were silent.

'We shall soon be going, shall we not?' asked Valerians in order to say something.

'Yes, now that you are well,' said Raïssa in a listless voice.

'You yourself are in need of different air than that of this country!'

'Oh, I——' said Raïssa.

Her hand dropped despondingly on the arm of the chair. The pale sunlight glinted for a moment on the wedding-ring.

Gretzky noticed the jewel, and his face became slightly overcast.

'May I ask what your plans are on your return?' he said.

This time Raïssa looked him straight in the face. Hers showed not the slightest anxiety. After two days of most painful reflection, she had made up her mind once for all; there was not the slightest sign of agitation.

'I shall settle down somewhere in the provinces. My father had some relatives in the Government of R——. I shall go and live with them.'

She ceased speaking. Valerian did not care to break the silence.

'And while we are on the subject,' she went on after awhile, 'I should like to say a few words more, monsieur. I therefore thank you for having anticipated my wishes. You are well enough now to look after your own affairs. Here are the last accounts of your estate.'

She rose and took from a small cupboard close at hand the papers prepared a few hours before her departure from Komarino.

Valerian, with a polite wave of the hand, declined to look at them, but Raïssa insisted.

'You had better look for yourself, because you must remember you have no steward.'

At that moment Valerian thought that he never had had, nor would have, a steward like Raïssa.

'There is something else I wish to say,' continued the young woman.

There was an evident effort on her part; she stammered and seemed at a loss for words. Then all of a sudden, lifting herself on both elbows out of her chair, she drew from her finger the wedding-ring, and placed it silently on the table before Valerian.

Both remained looking at one another, but neither spoke a word.

A strange feeling of joy, immediately drowned by a

rising wave of sadness, had come over Gretzky. She had returned him his troth. He was free. The marriage could be annulled if she liked.

The day was on the wane; Raïssa's room was perfectly still. The young woman lay back in her chair mute and motionless; Valerian rose, bowed deferentially to his wife, and walked slowly out into the air. He was bound to go slowly, for he reeled like a man in drink. He was free at last. The freedom for which he had wished and prayed was his. The hateful yoke which had made him wish for Raïssa's death every now and then was lifted from him. Still this unexpected solution had struck him too abruptly; he himself could scarcely believe in it. That was how he accounted for his troubled feelings, for the undercurrent of melancholy that marred his joy.

He went home, flung his fur coat on a chair, and sat down to reflect. His eyes involuntarily wandered to the place occupied by Raïssa many an evening. The empty chair was like a reproach to him. He soon got rid of his ingratitude. Now that Raïssa was no longer aught to him —for the annulling of the marriage was merely a matter of time and form—he felt that he owed some gratitude to the woman who had done so much for him. In spite of himself, while in the flush of his victorious pride, he began to recapitulate the services Raïssa had rendered him. There was, first of all, her more than conscientious management of his property; there were the delicate observances in connection with his mother's grave, the benevolent and gentle concern for his dependents; there was the life of his nephew saved once, that of his sister saved twice by Raïssa; there was the pardon obtained, his fortune restored intact, his own health recovered through her nursing. All these made up a series—a long

and unbroken series—of benefits conferred. Did he really owe nothing to this woman?

'I'll make her an allowance,' he said aloud. 'A handsome allowance. I owe her that much, if only for the world's sake.'

This compromise with his conscience was far, however, from setting that conscience at rest. So he sat musing and musing until disturbed by the entrance of Sabakine.

As the latter was leaning over the table to speak to him he caught sight of Raïssa's ring, which lay glistening in the lamplight.

'What's this?' asked his friend.

'This, my boy? This is my freedom. It's my divorce.'

'Your wife's ring? She has returned it to you?'

'Yes; an unexpected bit of luck, is it not?'

Valerian tried to work himself up to the required pitch of elation; but he played his part badly.

'Your wife gives you back your freedom, and you'll ask for a divorce?' asked Sabakine emphatically.

'Of course I shall. What else do you think I'll do?'

Sabakine put both his hands on the table and looked Valerian straight in the face, leaning towards him as he did:

'Nothing else, and you'll do wisely,' he said; 'and if she'll have me I shall deem it an honour to marry her.'

Gretzky winced as if he had been struck.

'You; you would marry her?'

'Yes, my boy; I would marry her.'

Valerian shrugged his shoulders and tried to smile.

'You are in love with her?'

'No; I can't be in love with your wife; but I shall deem it an honour to marry her.'

Gretzky was getting more and more angry, and in

order to hide his anger began to drum a march on the table.

'After the affair of the Red Tavern?' he growled between his teeth.

'After the affair of the Red Tavern, and if anyone attempted to remind me of it after she was my wife, I would send a bullet through his brain—if he were my best friend.'

Valerian rose from his chair, and began to pace up and down the room.

'We haven't got as far as that yet,' he said, with a kind of strident laugh. 'We must first of all get back to Europe, and there is time enough to think of it.'

'And a good thing too,' growled Sabakine, lighting a cigar.

CHAPTER XLIV.

From the moment she had returned the ring to Gretzky, Raïssa avoided him as much as possible; he, on the other hand, seemed to seek her society. He felt more at home with her; his old resentment against her had entirely disappeared, though he would have ill-brooked the mention of it by anyone.

Henceforth Raïssa was to him as any other woman.

There was no bar to the appreciation of her good qualities. He admired her noble devotion as warmly as his friends—nay, more than they perhaps, for one day Rózof said to him point-blank:

'It seems to me, Gretzky, that you are in a fair way of falling in love with your wife.'

Valerian looked at him savagely, but seemed not to think it worth while to dispute the impertinent remark.

The time fixed for their departure was drawing nigh. The large sums of money sent to the exiles by Raïssa, and of which they had but spent a little, had been useful in smoothing the difficulties of the journey. A few days more and they would be leaving the spot where so many new ideas and salutary thoughts had sprung up in their minds. Before going, the three friends made a last excursion to the various places that had most often beheld their revolts, their fits of impotent anger.

'After all is said and done,' observed Rézof in his off-hand way, 'it seems to me that I am a better man than when I came here. Do you know, Gretzky, that I should be sorry indeed to repeat an escapade such as that which led to this pretty journey.'

'Neither you nor I would,' replied Sabakine; 'but I am by no means certain that Gretzky has become a better man, though probably a wiser one.'

Valerian pretended not to hear. At last the carriages got under way, and the travellers, henceforward free, beheld stretched out before them the monotonous, yet withal blessed, road; every turn of the wheels on which would bring them nearer to family, home and civilization.

Valerian was bound to travel with his wife. Without violating the most elementary rules of etiquette, he could not leave her to the company of others during this long journey. For the first few days husband and wife scarcely exchanged a dozen words. Then, impelled by a secret desire, Gretzky began to talk to Raïssa. He was going to part for ever from this woman who had borne his name. Was it not natural that he should wish to know something of her before saying 'Farewell for aye'?

The finger-posts on the road succeeded one another quickly. Still Europe seemed as far off as ever. When they stopped to take their meals the friends were, of

course, together, and at such times Raïssa's sweet presence imparted an air of comfort and refinement to the commonplace surroundings.

She was always very grave; her smile had forsaken her since the day she had returned the ring to her husband; but her watchful kindness, her solicitude, and her gracefulness had remained, and made her dear and precious to all. Yes, to all. Valerian henceforth seemed to watch anxiously for the moment to get into the carriage with his wife, his whilom enemy. They did not stop to sleep, the posting stations being worse than any conveyance. When night came, Raïssa was often the first to go to sleep in a corner of the carriage as far as possible away from her husband. He sat listening to her breathing, soft and regular as that of a child. Now and then a sigh came from the half-parted lips; at other times, when Valerian pretended to be asleep, she sat, her eyes wide open, looking into space with a sad, dreamy stare. Was she contemplating her past, or vainly trying to pierce the future?

Gradually a tender pity sprang up in Valerian's breast. She was suffering, this young and beautiful woman, who had acted so nobly towards him. From what was she suffering? He dared not ask himself, least of all did he dare ask her. Still, more than once he felt tempted to take her hand, as a mark of sympathy.

His anger was a thing of the past; he no longer remembered the cruel refusal to his wife in the chapel. The incident had slipped his memory with many others. He only remembered her devotion, which he had so ill requited, her indomitable courage and patience shown on behalf of his sister, the constant care displayed by his sick-bed. Yes, it was sympathy, more than sympathy—friendship, that was stealing into his heart. And yet he

felt that this friendship came too late; he had too cruelly slighted her, and she had no friendship to give in return, for she avoided him. Why should she avoid him if she had aught but aversion for him? 'She will never forgive me the outrage in the Red Tavern,' he said to himself.

The desire of being forgiven became, however, more imperious every day. The carriage kept rolling on, it had crossed the European frontier; in a day or so Moscow would be in sight. Valerian wanted to know the worst.

One morning he awoke at dawn, Raïssa was still asleep. She had been crying, for two big tears had left their traces on her cheeks. He looked at her, surprised and delighted to find her so beautiful.

Never, to his thinking, had a woman's face expressed so much sweetness, so much grandeur of soul. Without reflecting upon what he did, he gently took Raïssa's hand, lying open in her lap, and kept it in his.

Raïssa awoke immediately with a confused start, drew herself up, smoothed her hair, and shrank into her corner.

For a moment or so she and Gretzky looked out of their respective windows at the pebbles in the road, apparently scudding past. Then Valerian made up his mind to speak.

'We'll soon be at the end of our journey,' he said.

Raïssa turned her sad and resigned face towards him.

'We are going to part, according to your wish?' he went on.

He meant it as a question, but Raïssa pretended not to understand.

'Before saying good-bye, I should like to make sure that there is "no heaven of anger" between us.'

Anger—and he spoke to her of anger! Her suffering was so great as to almost exhaust her patience. But she merely clasped her hands tighter across her knees.

'Well?' said Valerian, seeing that she did not answer.

'I have no anger against you,' she said wearily.

'And still I have done you a grievous wrong, for which I should like your forgiveness.'

She looked at him sadly. '*A* grievous wrong.' One only. And what of all the others? But what did it matter now?

The explanation was more difficult than Valerian had foreseen. Nevertheless, it had to be got over.

'Yes,' he said, 'before leaving you for ever, I should like to be certain that you have pardoned and forgiven me the injury—the injury that made you my wife.'

'I have forgiven you, as I have forgiven your friends,' replied Raïssa, whose face had turned crimson.

'But I am more guilty than my friends,' stammered Valerian, more embarrassed than ever he had been in his life, than he ever thought he could have been.

'You; it was you!' cried Raïssa.

Then Valerian remembered his refusal to speak. He remembered how she had implored him to speak the truth. No, he could not understand the finer emotions of the female heart, wounded in its most delicate fibres; but he felt, nevertheless, that between the three men she must have suffered cruelly.

She was no longer looking at him. Her face, crimson, flushed, had turned away.

All at once a sudden light burst on Valerian. To have forgiven him his silence, the last and most cruel injury of all, she must have loved him.

But if she did love him! He felt his heart melt. All the admiration he had concealed, thrust back to his heart,

All the tenderness which he had converted into hatred, all the gratitude which he had changed into ingratitude, rose to his lips like a big wave; he could not speak.

Taking from his watch-chain the ring Raïssa had returned to him, he took the hand which was timidly held back, and replaced the nuptial ring on the finger which it had recently quitted.

'Forgive me,' said he, scarcely able to speak. 'I am an ungrateful wretch, but, Raïssa, I love you—and you are my wife.'

She answered only with tears.

At the next posting station, where they had refreshment, Rézof noticed the band of gold on the young wife's finger.

'Hallo!' he said, under his breath.

'The Countess has promised to forgive me one day the various wrongs I have done her.'

THE END.

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